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Period Pieces:
On Jean Clay

YVE-ALAIN BOIS

I

The three texts by Jean Clay presented here were all recently gathered in an anthology of his essays from 1967 to 1983 entitled *Atopiques: De Manet à Ryman* that I co-edited with Thierry Davila and Ginette Morel, published in France last year.[1] I wrote a sizable preface for it in which I attempted to give a full account of Clay's long career and evolving positions as a critic, insisting on the division of his production into two distinct ensembles—two periods. Owing to unforeseen delays in the production of *Atopiques*, my preface first appeared in English, two years ahead of its French publication.[2] In order to introduce the present selection of Clay's texts for *October,* I initially wanted to write a short version of said preface, but this proved impossible. Instead, I have decided on a sort of reminiscence—not only of Jean Clay but of something I had (appropriately) left out, which is the part I played in the narrative of his two magazines, *Robho* and *Macula*: first as cameo, then as partner in crime.

Before embarking on this narrative, however, I would like to quote the first sentence of my preface to *Atopiques* and append a comment to it: "As I write these lines," I began,

> Jean Clay (J.C.) is as forgotten as was Félix Fénéon in 1945, when *F.F. ou le critique* (Jean Paulhan's book on him) was published, and equally reluctant to come out of the shadows. Like Fénéon, whom he admires, J.C. has lived many lives (political activist, journalist, art historian and critic, publisher); like Fénéon he was entirely self-taught, and, like Fénéon, he stopped writing.[3]

Here I would just add that, whereas it is perfectly true that in France Clay's writings had faded into oblivion before their re-publication in *Atopiques* (to formi-

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[1] Strasbourg: L'Atelier Contemporain, 2024.

[2] It is published as "J.C. or the Critic," trans. Nicolas Huckle, in my volume *An Oblique Autobiography* (New York: noplacepress, 2022), pp. 81–102.

[3] Ibid., p. 81. At this juncture in the text is a footnote that reads: "I should say, rather, that although Jean Clay stopped writing as an author, he continued to write as an editor. Some of the notes in his critical edition of the French translation of Barnett Newman's *Selected Writings and Interviews* are close to being small treatises."

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dable critical acclaim), the case is a bit different in the US, thanks in large part to *October*. Clay's last text (he forswore professional writing in 1983)—"Onguents, fards, pollens," a virtuoso essay on Manet considered by many (including myself) to be his best—had originally appeared in the mediocre catalogue of an abysmal exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (*Bonjour Monsieur Manet*), a context that would have rendered it totally invisible had it not been immediately translated into English and published in *October* (no. 27, Winter 1983) under the title "Ointments, Makeup, Pollen," which ensured that it would be taken seriously by English-speaking readers, notably Manet specialists.[4] To my knowledge it was Clay's only essay to appear in English, until now.

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"Period Pieces" is a suitable title for the pages that follow, though I could have just as well have called it "Down Memory Lane." At the core of the story are two journals, both of which were co-founded and co-edited by Jean Clay: *Robho,* which lasted five issues (the last being a double), published between 1967 and 1971; and *Macula,* which lasted four issues (the last two being doubles), published between 1976 and 1979. They were as disparate as possible in terms of layout, content, and tone: *Robho* was modeled on underground fanzines; *Macula* adopted all the codes of the academic periodical.

I met Jean as a young teenager who saw himself as a budding artist (ridiculous but true), and he immediately took on the role of mentor (I was fourteen, he was thirty-two). I was living in Toulouse but would rush to Paris whenever I had a break from school, heedless of the 450 miles separating the two cities; my visits to Jean quickly became the high point of these trips. At the time he was particularly well known as a defender of kinetic art, which I had encountered on my own and found seductive. Jean helped me refine my appreciation of it—to differentiate a Victor Vasarely (whose recent work he loathed), say, from a Jesús Rafael Soto (whom he adored) from a François Morellet (whom he admired).

The first issue of *Robho* appeared in June 1967, not long after we'd met, and had many distinctive characteristics. It sported an outlandish layout (thanks to the Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez), with text and image printed in sepia on large folded sheets (34 x 22 inches) that required some rather delicate manipulation on the part of the reader. It pursued a ludic conception of poetry, advocated by its co-editor, the poet Julien Blaine, that was utterly unfamiliar to me: It was as likely to occur in the streets as between the pages of a printed book, with roving performers somehow configuring mobile sentences, perhaps, or buildings manipulated in photographs to make them look like letters. It featured news that was deliberately international in scope (involving the activities of Lev Nussberg in Russia, for example). It collaborated with experimental groups of all kinds—with the editors of the radicalish *Melp!*, for example, a short-lived journal run by students of the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, who contributed a double spread of their own devoted to Buckminster Fuller, then virtually unknown in France.[5] But most impressive to me was Jean's very long manifesto, "La peinture est finie" [Painting is done for], in which he completely redrew the cartography of kinetic art as I had known it, moving away from Op art and the gadgetry that was then invading galleries. To be sure, Jean's heroes were still Soto and the participants in the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), which he admired for its works involving spectatorial participation, but he was drafting a new genealogy, one involving figures like Man Ray (with his "tactile objects"), Allan Kaprow, and Lucio Fontana, as well as new people like Hans Haacke, whose 1966 *Icestick* Clay reproduced—the first time, to my knowledge, that it appeared in a French magazine.

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[4] The Pompidou exhibition opened on June 8, 1983, and closed on October 3, just a couple months before the appearance of Clay's text in *October* (it was translated, a mite too hastily perhaps, by John Shepley). Since then, the essay has been a staple of the literature on Manet. The most attentive critical response to it is by Michael Fried, who lays out his disagreements in "'Manet's Sources' Reconsidered," in *Manet's Modernism: Or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

The second issue, from November 1967, doubled down on all this, including on the work of Haacke, with his *Icestick* being featured once again, this time in the form of a full-page close-up on the cover, and six pages of text being devoted to the artist. There was also an enthusiastic account of the activities of Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni's B.M.P.T., information about the "Club of Concretists" in Prague, and a more traditional essay by Jean—ever the pedagogue prone to revisiting historical figures—on Richard Paul Lohse, Max Bill's sidekick on the Swiss team in the "Concrete Art" movement. But once again what struck me most was the editorial (unsigned but penned by Jean), "Le cinétisme est-il un académisme?" [Is kineticism an academicism?]—an answer in the affirmative being clearly signaled by the *horror populi* described in the text's first two sentences: "One morning, Hans Hartung was horrified to find out he had two thousand followers. It took ten years to get rid of this oil slick: tachism."

I won't offer an exhaustive list of the contents of the following issues here; instead, I will content myself with saluting in passing the dossiers devoted to the Argentinian group Madi (no. 3) and Lygia Clark (no. 4):[6] For decades thereafter, both sets of texts represented the most complete documentation of their respective topics in languages other than Spanish and Portuguese. Above all, I would like to underline the increasing political radicalism of the journal, offering, with every issue, ever more information on how to wage its preferred kind of guerrilla warfare against cultural institutions. The fourth issue, for example, which appeared in the fall of 1968, was steeped in the utopian atmosphere of the events of that May.

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[5] On *Melp!*, as well as *Utopie*, another radical architectural journal with which *Robho* was affiliated, see Véronique Patteeuw, "Architecture, Writing and Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s," *Architectural Theory Review* 15, no. 3, pp. 281–97.

[6] Interested readers will soon be able to see for themselves: In collaboration with gta exhibitions at the ETH Zürich, noplacepress is preparing facsimile editions of the complete run of both *Robho* and *Macula*, along with English translations.

On its cover was a close-up of Tommie Smith raising his black-gloved fist at the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico; on the bottom, at an angle, was a black band with the words *theatre guerilla,* which referred to, among other things, several essays on experimental theater offered in the journal's pages.

The final issue, the largest, was slow in coming, appearing only in the spring of 1971. This is when I make my modest reappearance in the narrative. After graduating from high school, not so sure anymore that I wanted to be an artist and not too excited by what I had seen of the École des Beaux-Arts and even less by the excruciatingly dull art-history courses I had audited at the (otherwise excellent) University of Toulouse, I took a year off and came to the US as an exchange student. To my great disappointment, I was enrolled not in a university but in a high school, and not in New York City but in rural Pennsylvania. I arrived in the summer of 1969, immediately after the race riots that had devastated nearby York and just in time to watch the moon landing in real time on TV. These were dramatic times socially and politically—Woodstock, Kent State, the invasion of Cambodia, etc.—as well as artistically. I devoured *Artforum,* which was then at its zenith, regularly stealing copies of it from the one newsstand in Hanover, Pennsylvania (how on earth a journal like that could end up in a remote locale like Hanover is something that has always puzzled me). Counting on my visiting New York, Jean had appointed me his envoy: On behalf of *Robho* I was to browse the "most advanced" galleries of the city, gather as much information as I could, and obtain photographs of recent works by the artists represented. I did indeed bring him back a copious stash of photos given to me by a host of galleries (Dwan, Castelli, O.K. Harris, Paula Cooper, Howard Wise, Bykert, Fischbach . . .) of works by Serra, Oppenheim, Heizer, Andre, On Karawa. . . . I was smitten with these photos, and it was not without regret that I relinquished them to a gleeful and grateful Jean upon my return to France in July 1970.

My surprise and, at first, consternation were thus pronounced when, nearly a year later, he gave me the final issue of *Robho.* Jean had indeed made good use of the spoils of my trip, deploying many of the images to accompany his text "Certain Aspects of Bourgeois Art," but in a way that left me flabbergasted when I read it. If a photo appeared in the article, it was invariably to accompany one form of heavily sarcastic commentary or another concerning the piece that it depicted. Further, many of the artists whose work was not illustrated but who had been previously praised in the journal were similarly mocked. A remarkable case is that of Haacke: All the early work that preceded the artist's pivot to sociopolitical issues—generously reproduced and discussed in 1967—was now gently derided as "inoffensive"; it was only Haacke's then recent sociopolitical turn (notably his participation in MoMA's 1970 *Information* show) that saved him from being dismissed (like nearly all the artists discussed in the essay) as a cog in the institutional machinery of bourgeois culture.[7] Other critical U-turns were less spectacular but still crucial: The ludic aspects of many avant-garde manifestations, which had filled the pages of earlier issues and continued to be defended elsewhere in the magazine (such as in the section dealing with theater), were now belittled, and the concern with "ecology," to which was ascribed the new phenomenon of Land art, was curtly lambasted as a mere tree-hugging distraction for potentially revolutionary politicized youth.

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[7] Elsewhere in the issue, a news column is devoted to the cancellation of Haacke's show at the Guggenheim in April 1971.

What had happened? Once again, Haacke makes for an illuminating example. One of the targets of Jean's essay is the funding of museum exhibitions by large corporations. For this reason he is particularly dismissive of *When Attitudes Become Form,* which had been financed by Philip Morris. Nor is he less caustic with regard to another, far less well-known exhibition, *New Alchemy: Elements, Systems, Forces,* which took place in Toronto and Montreal in the fall of 1969, the beautifully designed catalogue of which I had obtained from Howard Wise and proudly brought back to Jean after my stay in the US. The two heroes of that show were Haacke (with fifteen works, all illustrated, many of them previously published in *Robho*) and Takis, an artist whom Jean and the journal had been supporting from the get-go (a whole section of that same last issue is devoted to Takis's clash with MoMA, followed by translated articles about and by the Art Workers Coalition). Obviously, the ridiculous preface of the *New Alchemy* catalogue, from which Jean quotes in his essay, penned by the president of Benson & Hedges Canada, had been too much for him to stomach.

This seeming about-face did not, however, come out of the blue. *Robho*'s political stance had always been very close to that of the Situationists (including their emphasis on the liberating potential of play, an oft-forgotten element of their discursive strategy).[8] And it so happened that a newcomer, Jean Baudrillard, had recently taken it upon himself to tweak the Situationist argument and apply it to the follies of the art market and its dominion over cultural institutions. Baudrillard's first two books, to which Jean makes explicit reference in the essay, owed a lot to Guy Debord and were much more politically radical than the philosopher's later work. Many of the tirades of "Certain Aspects of Bourgeois Art," in fact, are taken straight from Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society,* including that odd dismissive allusion to the lure of ecology.[9] Baudrillard diverged from the Situationists in that he saw any invitation to play as one of the many mechanisms of seduction deployed by consumer society. When Jean adopted this stance in "Certain Aspects" he also adopted its pessimism, if not its full-fledged defeatism: Despite the fiery call to arms with which it ends, the essay can be read today as a farewell to utopia. This is in part what explains its relentless attack on Daniel Buren, whom Jean condemns as a false prophet (one does have to grant a certain degree of prescience here: Fifteen years later, Buren would install his columns in the Palais-Royal, thereby becoming the official court jester of the Fifth Republic). The French political situation was dire at the time (though the right-wing policies of the Pompidou government are nearly all forgotten today, as are the state censorship and the police wagons camping out at every crossroads of the Latin Quarter), and the "profit-society" was eerily successful in covering everything up via the various seductions on offer. Institutional critique was no match, and the (repressed) assumption was that nothing was.

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[8] On *Robho*'s borrowing from Situationism on this count, see my "J.C. or the Critic," p. 85. In the long interview with Thierry Davila and Valérie Mavridorakis that concludes *Atopiques,* Jean repeatedly highlights the ludic activities (taking place mostly in the streets) of the *Robho* gang.

[9] The same issue contains Baudrillard's dispatch from the International Design Conference in Aspen (June 1970), in which he condemns the new concern for ecology as a soft ideological maneuver on the part of the capitalist system to mask the reality of class struggle. Baudrillard's text was illustrated with a photograph of an unexploded bomb in a Vietnam village ("Du scoutisme au napalm," *Robho* no. 5–6, p. 53). (On this conference, see Alice Twemlow, "I Can't Talk to You If You Say That: An Ideological Collision at the International Design Conference at Aspen, 1970," *Design and Culture* 1, no. 1, pp. 23–40.) Let us note as well in passing that many items cited anecdotally by Jean as exemplars of the consumer society are also to be found in Baudrillard's eponymous book, notably the then-brand-new Parly II shopping mall in a Paris suburb.

II

An interval of five years separates the final issue of *Robho* and the first of *Macula*, the journal I launched with Jean in the spring of 1976. The political atmosphere had thawed slightly: The Vietnam War had ended, Giscard d'Estaing's government was proving less brutal than its predecessor, the immense disappointment that had followed the eruption of May 1968 was abating, etc. This meant that, though political struggles were still a high priority for us, the intensity of our engagement had slackened a bit, having been replaced by a feverish enthusiasm for theoretical investigation. We were on the cusp of what was to be called "post-structuralism," and as I was then a student of Roland Barthes and Hubert Damisch at the École pratique des hautes études, it was my turn to play the role of mentor.

I introduced Jean, whose ideological anchors had been Sartre and Situationism, to a new universe of discourse (I'd skipped reading Sartre, having been inoculated against him by structuralist authors, Foucault in particular, who never avoided an opportunity to attack his illustrious predecessor). At that moment it was no longer possible to believe that art could change the world, or at any rate that it could do so directly and in an unmediated way. In Jean's texts from the *Robho* years, the "sign" had always been considered the bad object par excellence, a sad, scrawny leftover from the *vécu*. Now it was assumed that the only life possible was as a subject under the empire of signs. Yet Jean did not really go through a semiological phase, having discovered structuralism shortly after its positivist moment, at a time when two of its foremost representatives, Barthes and Foucault, had already moved on to other things and Derrida was busy unknitting it.

The change in the general context is not the only factor explaining why Jean had become open to theoretical orientations he had up until then (as a true Sartre devotee) considered frivolous. During the five-year hiatus between magazines he had also adopted a new modus vivendi. While he was editing *Robho,* his day job had been working for a flashy general-interest monthly magazine called *Réalités,* which he despised. *Robho* had been the antidote to *Réalités,* and it is not a coincidence that when he closed up the one, he stopped working for the other. However, the publisher of *Réalités,* reluctant to see one of his most prized contributors leave the fold, offered Jean a job writing art-historical coffee-table books, which Jean, in need of a paying job, accepted. Indeed, he took the task so much to heart that he and his friend Jean-Louis Germain, a designer, completely revamped the genre. To quote Thierry Davila about the trilogy devoted to the birth of modernity—*L'Impressionnisme* (1971), *De l'impressionnisme à l'art moderne* (1975), and *Le Romantisme* (1980), which was written during (but published after) the *Macula* years—those books

> develop a conception of history conceived as a history of works and processes. In his introductions and forwards, Jean Clay exposes the precious tenets of his method, and these pages are worth re-reading today, as one finds in them the definition of a new kind of formalism whose function is to irrigate a historical, thematic, and processual approach, as stated in the forward of *Modern Art*:
>
>> I had no desire to write here for the hundredth time a chronological, exhaustive, and nominative history in which all the facts would be organized according to the reassuring development of a genealogical tree, or the implacable linearity of a diagram. I have attempted the opposite. From the corpus of the productions of the period—already limited in this case to what the present division of cultural categories designates as *painting,* a division that by no means covers every area of pictorial practice—I have selected six possible axes [color, distortion, fragmentation, planarity, inclusion of real objects, movement] and distribute along these axes, in pertinent series, three hundred paintings. The presentation is deliberately tabular and synchronic in order to emphasize visually . . . certain constant factors, certain main lines that cross and depict the art of the twentieth century as a moment of decisive crisis. This method implies that I relativize these groupings of circumstance with their journalistic labels (Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, etc.) and also that I avoid a biographical emphasis: paintings by the same artist can be categorized under different headings given that the various and often contradictory effects that they produce seem more important to me than the name under which they were exhibited.[10]

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[10] Thierry Davila, "L'anonymat est un combat," postface to *Atopiques,* p. 433. The quotation is from *Modern Art 1890–1918* (New York: Vendome Press, 1978), p. 4, originally published as *De l'impres-*

Davila is right to point to the "new kind of formalism" that Jean developed in these volumes, which only looked like coffee-table books and whose texts, though written for a general audience, demanded a focused attention on the part of the reader (the English publisher realized as much and so for the translation of *Le Romantisme* hired no less an authority in post-structuralist theory than Craig Owens).[11] Although *L'Impressionnisme* still owed a lot to the utopian mode of the *Robho* years, the writing of the second book of the trilogy, *De l'impressionnisme à l'art moderne*, coincided with Jean's discovery of structuralism and in particular of Russian formalism, which, along with Walter Benjamin's nonlinear conception of history (which he discovered around the same time), would henceforth provide the backbone of his critical approach. He labeled his brand of formalism "open," in direct opposition to that of Clement Greenberg, which he called "restrained" (Greenberg's essentialism being a point of particular contention). In one of his *Macula* essays (on Robert Ryman), Jean wrote, "A little formalism limits us to the object; a lot of it frees us from it," adding, " . . . by exposing the process in all of its components, the object appears only for what it is: an assemblage, the effect of a series of series, the temporary result of a moving play of plastic and discursive formations—a *monument* in Foucault's sense, whose laws of formalization are always historical and must be determined."[12]

Having to forge his own kind of formalism (with the help of Russian literary predecessors) was not the only side effect of Jean's work on his art books; another, just as important for the rest of his career, was a rekindling of his love of painting. Gone was the sentiment behind the slogan "la peinture est finie" of *Robho*'s early days. In fact, from then on, Jean wrote exclusively on painting: Ryman, Martin Barré, Pollock, Manet, and many others.

But let's re-enter the narrative at the moment when Jean was finishing the manuscript of *De l'impressionnisme à l'art moderne*, in 1974, which is around the time I brought him to one of Hubert Damisch's seminars (I cannot remember which one). He was reluctant at first to attend but very quickly became a regular and active participant; indeed, it was the spark of the class that gave us the final push we needed to realize our gestating plans to start a new journal. We had long been aggravated by the mediocrity of the French literature on art. Academic art history of the time was dominated by a reactionary and nationalist faction fixated on the French artists of the Grand Siècle and utterly opposed to any attempt at interpre-

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sionnisme à l'art moderne, trans. Arnold Rosin (slightly modified).

[11] The text, which patiently deconstructs the customary opposition between neoclassicism and Romanticism, owes a lot to *The Literary Absolute* by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, two of the most accomplished philosophers in the practice of "deconstruction." Owens quotes the book and refers to his translation in his essay "Representation, Appropriation, and Power" (1982), reprinted in his posthumous volume *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 28. (*Romanticism* was published by Chartwell Books in 1983.)

[12] Clay, "La peinture en charpie," *Macula*, no. 3–4, reprinted in *Atopiques*, p. 210.

tation. There were few French art-historical publications that were not about French art or not written by French art historians. One of our goals was simply to bring into circulation German, English, and American art-historical texts that interested us.

If French art history was bad, French art criticism wasn't any better. Its absolute lack of rigor was appalling: One searched in vain, for example, for precise descriptions of works of art or assessments grounded in history. We were particularly disgusted by the belletristic prose that dominated exhibition catalogues issued by galleries, in which famous writers pompously rhapsodized without saying anything specific about the works in question. We loathed this kind of discourse, all the more when it came from writers we otherwise admired. And yet, though we had no intent of exculpating the *littérateurs*, we admitted the existence of attenuating circumstances: With regard to modern and contemporary art in particular, it was extremely difficult to do one's homework, given the paucity of French museums devoted to the subjects and the near-absence of readily available documentation at the time.[13] By contrast, we had been very impressed with the high standard of American art criticism, attributing it to the fact that most American critics were art historians or curators with access to (and interest in) a vast repository of knowledge (scholarly books and catalogues, public collections) concerning twentieth-century art. One way to alter the dismal French situation, we thought, was to publish translations of texts we admired and to offer critical editions of historical documents, particularly texts written by artists.

At the same time, we wanted to intervene more directly in the contemporary scene—not just as purveyors of source material. The high voltage of the theoretical production in the field of literary studies stimulated us, and we saw no reason why a similar quality could not be infused into discussions about art (Damisch's seminar providing all the encouragement we needed on this score). Chary of the famous-writer-on-art genre, we refrained from soliciting philosophers for contributions about art per se; instead, we asked them to comment upon issues of aesthetics and philosophical texts pertaining to those issues. We also asked artists whose work we liked, and about which we wrote, to help us frame what they thought were the most urgent theoretical issues they faced in their practice. Each issue of *Macula* was conceived as an assemblage, in which texts coming from utterly different horizons would interact. Like *Robho*, it lasted only four years, and Jean spent as much energy editing the one as the other.

Foremost among the American critics we read and admired was Rosalind Krauss. Damisch had introduced her work to us, and I met her in Paris during the summer of 1977. The two of us immediately perceived an affinity between our respective journals. Rosalind had just published "Notes on the Index" in *October*, and Jean and I decided to commission a translation of it for the next issue of

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[13] On the lamentable state of the public collections of modern art in France until the late 1970s, see my essay "Better Late Than Never (On the Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne)" in *An Oblique Autobiography*, pp. 223–32.

Macula. At the time, Jean had just published a dossier on Hans Namuth's photographs of Pollock at work (in the second issue of our journal) and was preparing a book dedicated to the same topic; he suggested to Rosalind that she write an essay for it, which she did (the book appeared in early 1978 under the title *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock*; it was the first in a long list of volumes published by Éditions Macula under Jean's stewardship).[14] In that essay, entitled "Emblèmes ou lexies: le texte photographique" (later published in English as "Reading Photographs as Text"), Rosalind voiced her disagreement with certain aspects of Jean's short presentation of Namuth's work in *Macula*, notably his discussion of the allover and his comparison between Namuth's interpretation of Pollock's practice and Vuillard's use of wallpaper in his compositions. Jean felt the need to respond, but there was no time for that (our friendly printer had already booked some time for us and rescheduling would have cost a fortune—needless to say, *Macula* always operated on a shoestring budget). *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock* quickly sold out and demand grew for a reprint, which led to a second, much enlarged edition of the book in 1982. It is for this second edition that Jean wrote "Flat Death: Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat."[15] Not exactly a riposte, but he held his ground. No harm was done, though, and Jean remained an ardent supporter of Rosalind's work in France, publishing no fewer than three of her books.

Here my narrative ends, since by the time the second edition of *L'Atelier* came out, *Macula* had ceased publication (not for lack of funds, as is often assumed, but rather out of sheer editorial fatigue, mainly on my part) and Éditions Macula had become Jean's de facto empire. I remained in the picture as an adviser, so to speak, suggesting an author to approach, a book to translate (particularly after I left France for the US once and for all in 1983). Living away from Paris during the two years that preceded my expatriation, I did not witness the genesis and gestation of Jean's remarkable "Gauguin, Nietzsche, Aurier: Notes on Symbolism's Material Inversion," an essay inexplicably ignored in the literature on late-nineteenth-century art. The reader thus has carte blanche.

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[14] The full list is given as an appendix of *Atopiques*, pp. 471–74.

[15] Elsewhere in the volume Jean inserted a long note arguing against Rosalind's then still steadfast defense of the concept of medium specificity, entitled "Quelques remarques sur les propos de Rosalind Krauss concernant les rapports de la photo et de la peinture, et sur la photo en général." He did not deem it worth republishing in *Atopiques*, probably because Rosalind has long since abandoned this tenet of her "Greenbergian" years.

Flat Depth: Pollock, Mondrian, and Seurat*

JEAN CLAY

It is important that Pollock wanted these photos and these films. It is important that he gave himself over, after some thought, to the flash and cut of the camera lens. Namuth's pictures work in the first place as caption(s), telling us about the painter's practice. They show us, of course, the untouched and untouchable surface, the dripped inscription of the woven tracings. But they also show the (hard) floor coming through, acting as backing, persisting like a present/absent memory in the canvas that enacts its remembering. Pollock does not work the wall in the literal way of a fresco, but rather in the deferred way of a presence of the ground in the surface ("It's right there in front of you"). His canvases, in the 1950s at least, so heavy as to not need anything to fix them to the floor, work as relays, parietal laminae. Hoisting them up into a vertical position in the studio and then in the gallery, the painter carries and preserves the properties of a wallness that *declares* itself via a certain distancing—in the cushion of air between wall and canvas.

These photos have long been considered primarily for what they show of Pollock at work. And yet they call for a different interpretation. In presenting them as we do in this volume, we have avoided any of the usual cropping that happens when a photo is required to fit the format of the page, and when, most often by a traditional centering on the supposed main "motif" (the artist), the photo's true relevance is obscured. Any doing-over, so as to make the volume's "full page" mimic the Pollockian *allover*, any framing of what was in the first

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* Editor's note: This text is the result of a three-part, five-year process. The first act was a short essay by Jean Clay that appeared in *Macula* (no. 2) in 1977 under the title "Hans Namuth critique d'art" and that introduced a selection of photographs, several of which had never been published before. The second piece of the puzzle was an essay by Rosalind Krauss, commissioned by Clay, that appeared under the title "Emblèmes ou lexies: le texte photographique" in *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock,* a book published by Éditions Macula in 1978. In it Krauss criticizes Clay's take on the allover and his comparison of Pollock with Vuillard. It is to this that Clay is responding in the present essay, which is much more than a revised version of his 1977 piece and which appeared in the second edition of *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock,* in 1982. In a footnote added to the reprinted version of this text in the volume *Atopiques*—see "Period Pieces" in the introduction of this cluster—Clay alludes to the collective nature of this palimpsest: "*The Atelier* is constructed like this, a fiction of a book coming into being through successive overlappings, a network traced by arguments and figures—an *allover* approach."

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place a work of framing, in other words, any cropping of that which took its first meaning as a cropping, would obliterate Namuth's original photographic choice, and it is rather that precise choice that we show here, in each case, by setting Namuth's photos against an arbitrary black background, giving them back to the eye that, in the click of the diaphragm, did the *seeing* some thirty years ago.[1]

So it is a case less of reproducing the photos than of actually producing them *as photos*, with the assurance that it is beyond the documentary evidence, at the level of the signifier, that these configurations follow on from one another—and not by means of a literal transposition of Pollock's pictorial enterprise into a photographic corpus but rather by attending to how, in these photos, a practice busy with making itself into painting is pre-figured, at the very moment of its appearance.

Because if it is true that, setting aside the assumption that these photos are a documentary portrait of an artist (a piece of studio reportage), Namuth could carry out this work only by imbuing himself with Pollock's characteristic spatial investment, then we can see in these photos the photographer extracting Pollock's breakthrough *in its very immediate action*, by means of a system of *lexias*,[2] bringing it thus to the light of day and actually theorizing it, with a force that more than matches the most perceptive critical texts of the time. Not *view*, therefore, but rather *seeingness*,[3] and even less a *viewpoint*, since this series, as a whole, falls more within the category of a *session*, along with the empathic relationship that it entails. Hans Namuth, art critic: a non-language-based interpretation. Contrary to what Émile Benveniste thought, language is not the sole interpretant of all other systems.[4]

If we look, for example, at the installation shots in the studio, included at the end of *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock* (notably of the series of large black-and-white canvases of 1951), we can see that the framing clearly happens at the sacrifice of the

[1] Editor's note: An English edition of *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock* was published in 1980, in which the layout of the photographs (including edge-to-edge full-page cropping) went counter to everything that Clay argues for in this essay. Edited by Barbara Rose, it was called *Pollock Painting: Photographs by Hans Namuth,* which is to say that the emphasis was on the artist at work and absolutely not on the interpretative, critical function of Namuth's photographs.

[2] "The tutor signifier will be cut up into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, which we shall call *lexias*, since they are units of reading. This cutting up, admittedly, will be arbitrary in the extreme; it will imply no methodological responsibility, since it will bear on the signifier, whereas the proposed analysis bears solely on the signified." Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), p. 13.

[3] "From the toils (*rets*), or rays (*rais*), if you prefer, of an iridescence of which I am at first a part, I emerge as eye, assuming, in a way, emergence from what I would like to call the function of *seeingness* (voyure)." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 82.

[4] Editor's note: Despite the immense respect Clay and the "Macula gang" had for Benveniste's linguistic and semiological work, proving him wrong on this point had been an obsession right from the start, something clearly stated in the editorial of the first issue of the journal, published in spring 1976.

units we know conventionally as paintings. It overcuts a fabric already worked through by fragmentation—several works are juxtaposed on a single canvas; there is a coalescence here and there of figures that seem to be grouped together only by chance.[5] Namuth's own regrouping, splitting up, and re-forging of Pollock's canvases reveals the phantasmatic unity of a wide field where the paintings emerge like so many *connected forces*: figural nodes surface as they take shape, and take shape as they fade away; fragments of an edgeless scene, gigantic splotches where the signs slip away the very instant they offer themselves; and screens to which come the beatings of eyes, faces, bodies.

In the same way, with the great 1950 series that takes up the central part of *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock*, the surface (of the photo) is not governed by a principle of composition. It is organized instead by an economy of appropriation, with torn-off, added-on patches, vertical strips, rectangles, and trapezoids massively filling the plane. They are *held* together by an initial ground (wooden floor) that is itself splattered and that functions as backing—suspending the drift of the fragments. Here we might decline (in the grammatical sense) the paradigm of wallpaper, linking as it does Namuth's photos to the history of painting. Degas, for example, contemplating the difficulty of seeing the foreshortening of perspective in a play of blobs, and using wallpaper [*papier peint*], often in a slanted layout, as a relay, avatar, or a means of detaching the figured wall, the latter coming thus to fold back onto the picture plane. This was a technique perfected by Vuillard, using the depiction of wallpaper to devour by metastasis any representational anecdote, giving form not so much to the spacing between objects as to the way that the latter have of sinking into the regular and decorative speckling that governs the quasi-totality of the surface. This wallpaper refers back in its turn to the flatness of the support (stretched canvas; lithographic plate) according to the sequence: *real* (the "motif," the referent, the wall *in situ*)—*symbolic* (the painted wallpaper [*papier peint*])—*real* (flat support). The wallpaper works as an articulator, a vehicle, a symbolic clutch mechanism between two "reals."

If we now read no longer Pollock through Namuth but rather Namuth by way of Vuillard (and recall that photography, born from the practice of engraving and taking over from it [plate, press, proof], also proceeds, since Daguerre, from an "originary" frontality and flatness), then we can see that the big spreads of painted canvas that divide up the space circumscribed by Namuth show themselves as a blistering detachment and removal from a primal surface—an exfoliation effect, and where we can see Pollock at work, in the midst of his own action, turning around to his own advantage the derogatory comparison of his painting with wallpaper that people thought they were heaping on him, and showing his works as a "halfway state" between "the easel and the mural."

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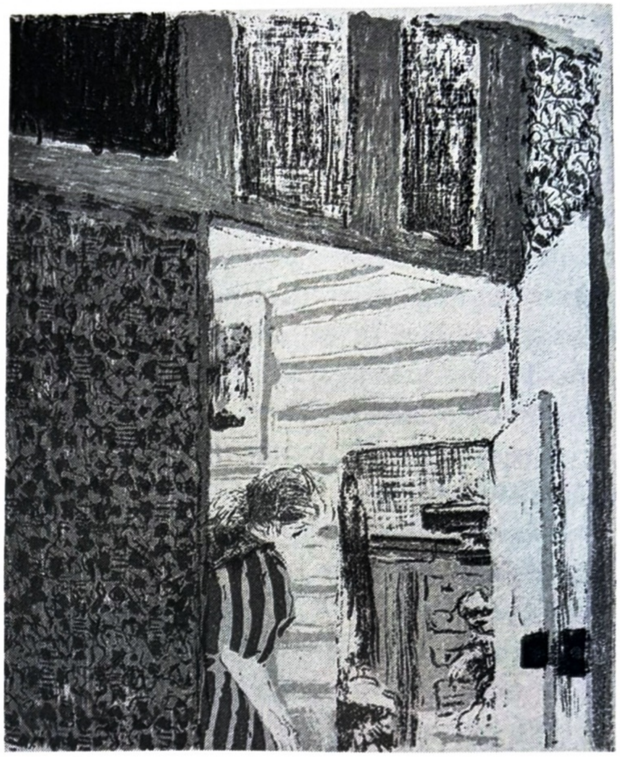
[5] "These enormous drawings, for that is what they are, were painted as a series which unfolded in almost a cinematographic fashion. They were painted, one after another, on long rolls of canvas which had been laid out on the floor of his studio. Some images were cut apart, others remained together." William S. Lieberman, *Jackson Pollock: Black and White*, exh. cat. (New York, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1969), np.



Édouard Vuillard. Lithograph. 1899.

The fragmentary sections of canvas, *discarded scraps,* floating and unstable bodies, that appear in Namuth's photos sometimes espouse the depth of the scene, the space of the studio; and sometimes (floating free) they reach the surface, realigning themselves with the flatness of the support. Depth is *at play* (and unplayed) in the reversibility of effects of dihedrons, boxes, folded screens, the hinges of which are the alleyways, gutters, and pathways in which the artist moves. As we saw with Vuillard's wallpapers, the fragments, in a constant coming-and-going, detach themselves so as to take on the character of the flat photographic surface—an aporia that becomes only the more entrenched (Vuillard already) by the similarity of the discrete units (splotches, tracery, drips) that cover the figured planes.

With both Vuillard and Namuth, the "originary" materiality returns, but transformed and displaced through the mediation of a work of fiction—human characters are frequently pushed to the margins or incorporated into the surrounding meshwork (Namuth's "camera shake"—a new kind of stump drawing). The main issue here is no longer the blurred, filtered, and embedded figure but the swelling of the figural field itself into the work of its own support.

Here, however, with the artist's "classic" allover period (1947–50), the sheer aggression of Namuth's cropping raises the question of the edge-to-edge, the edge limit, and segmentation. What are the limits on how far Pollock's equipotential space can be fragmented while still maintaining its specificity and effect? Surely, one might say, a Pollock is always to be seen as a fragment of a greater canvas.

Rosalind Krauss takes strong issue with this latter idea, arguing forcefully in her essay:

> It is important to state that if Pollock could only see his work in fragments as he painted it, the finished canvases have nothing to do with the language of fragment or cropping. They do *not* appear as parts cut from a larger whole. The skeins of line are painted out towards the edges of the canvas but they stop well before the edge. The pictures therefore internalize their own frames by means of reserves of unfigured ground bounding the contained all-over image.[6]

Certainly, if we begin by simply plotting out the work empirically, just as it presents itself as a quantifiable surface area, we have to agree with Krauss: Pollock does not paint *allover*, as can be seen clearly in photos and films. Although the artist's investment in the space is egalitarian from the get-go, proceeding from the outset by wide drippings targeted to take in the entire picture field, we can see that he does not engage in any sort of manic smattering of the edges. Those remain relatively untouched. Pollock's allover does not emerge during the actual painting session; it does not come from a desperate need to cover over everything, i.e., from a compulsion to maculate. When it happens (if it happens), the allover is the result of an intervention that takes place after the fact (like Bonnard's cropping)—a conscious and thought-out resumption, i.e., a work in two stages. It even occurred that Pollock exhibited canvases just as he had painted them, only to reduce them later in the studio to their definitive, smaller size.[7] This second phase is crucial, involving either a modification of the margins or a process in which, by means of physically cutting into the material support (cf. the 1948 untitled enamel on paper in the MNAM collection), the artist *produces* the work as a guillotined fragment cut from a wider field.[8] After having thought for a long time that Pollock's work consisted solely of allover paintings (in the sense of a covering edge to edge of the surface area), we might be tempted now to say that his work contains none at all (but how can we not mention the materially undeniable and complete allover works from 1937, 1943 [*Mural*], 1946, 1947, and 1948?).

And yet, no doubt, fetishizing the question of the cropping of the margins leads to a dead end. Most of the effects created by Pollock's innovation depend upon the viewer's close proximity to the canvas, with the resulting sense that its confines are fading away—like watching a wide-screen movie from the front row. And if, as William Rubin notes, "the all-over patterning came first and elicited the dripping,"[9] then it was perhaps necessary, in order to make it visible, to have it stand out against a reserved border—just as we see in Ryman, where the paint's penetration through the fiberglass surface and its adhesion to the wall require, in order for it to be read, the insertion of a sheet that defers the presence of the wall, exhibiting the suspension of the material that adheres, immobile, on the brilliance of a waxed paper curtain.[10]

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[6] See Rosalind Krauss, "Emblèmes ou lexies: le texte photographique," in both the 1978 and 1982 editions of *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock* (English original published as "Reading Photographs as Text" in *Pollock Painting: Photographs by Hans Namuth,* note 7, np).

[7] From an observation made by Francis O'Connor after comparing the current state of certain paintings with how they were exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950.

[8] This work in paper is the no. 192 of the catalogue raisonné of Pollock's work by Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), vol. 2, pp. 11–12.

The question should not be, in Pollock's case, one of emphasizing either the allover or the margin, but rather of taking seriously and examining the artist's vacillation here, leading him to espouse, by turns and at the same time, two materially different solutions (bearing in mind, as well, that we know what a torture the choice of framing was for him).[11] All of the work done in the field of artistic creation on the cropping of the margin since the painter's death in 1956 gives substance to this enigmatic vacillation. What remained undecided or undecidable in Pollock (what had for ten years, up until 1922, been one of the hidden wellsprings of Mondrian, and before that of Cubism), an artist such as Ryman, to limit ourselves to his case, made concrete, at the end of the 1950s, through a methodical inquiry into the function of the border (the tacking edge, the fringe), exploring the discernable zone where the art object asserts itself by detaching itself and standing out against an outside. He thus carries forward Pollock's (and others') tradition, going so far as to offer up from within the work, through the thrust of a

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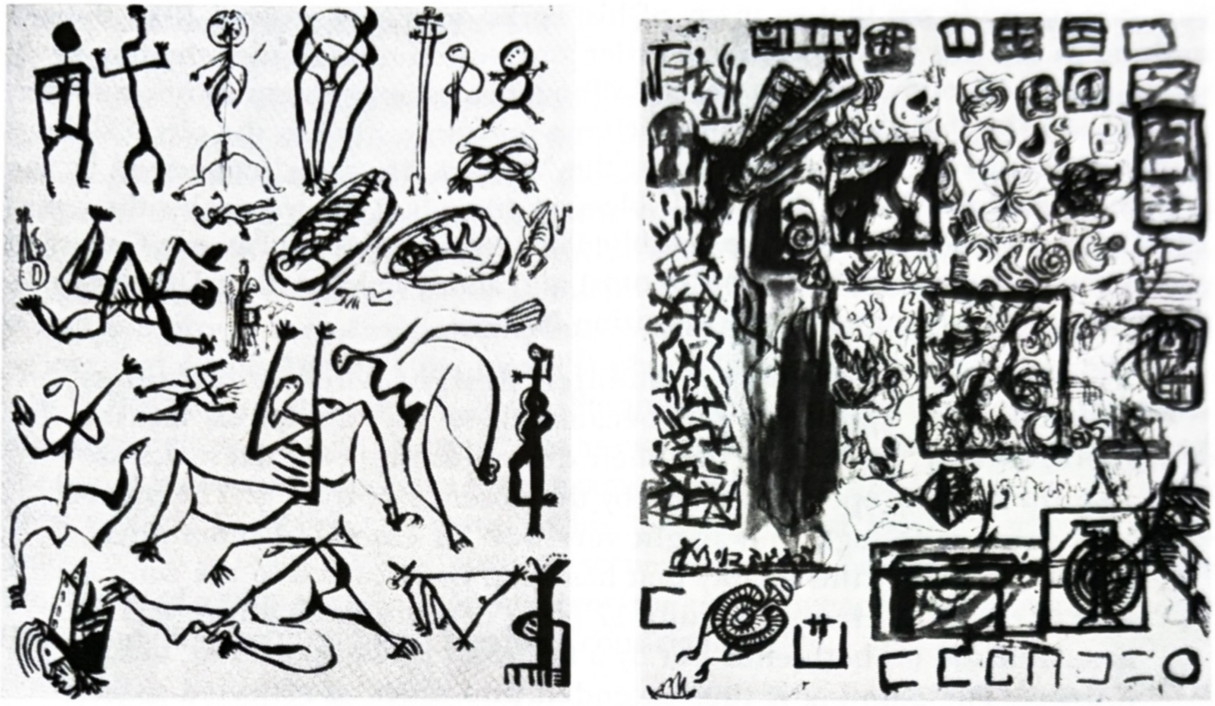
[9] William Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition," *Artforum*, February 1967, p. 17. The reader will find in this section numerous references to this article, indispensable through its length, that Rubin published across four successive issues of *Artforum* (February, March, April, May 1967). This essay was reprinted in full in Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), pp. 118–75.

[10] Editor's note: Clay is referring here to a series of small paintings on fiberglass on waxed paper, dating from 1970–71. An excellent description of them was provided by Naomi Spector in her essay, too modestly titled "Introduction," in the catalogue of Ryman's exhibition at the Stedeljik Museum, Amsterdam, in 1974. A French translation of this essay was published in the issue no. 3/4 of *Macula* (Fall 1978). "In 1970 and 1971, related non-serial works were made in oil on fiberglass in relatively small sizes—up to about 39 inches square. The idea here was to realize a tendency which had long been evident in various efforts toward getting the paint close to the wall by making the supporting material either thinner or less visible. Fiberglass was used here because of its extreme porousness. It is practically all air: only a few fibers cling together to support a surface layer of paint so that proportionately there is much more paint than there is material under it. All the fiberglass does is hold the paint together—it is as insubstantial as possible, so the paint itself becomes a *Surface Veil* between the viewer and the wall. One problem that arose from this was that as the paint was applied to the fiberglass panels, it penetrated it so easily that it served actually to attach the fiberglass to the wall as it dried. So, various materials were used as backing, including featherboard panels and sheets of waxed paper held on the wall with strips of masking tape" (p. 21).

[11] See B. H. Friedman's interview with Lee Krasner in *Jackson Pollock: Black and* White, exh. cat. (New York, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1969), reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews*, p. 38. It is worth noting that, in 1950, Krasner characterized Pollock's painting as "sort of unframed space "(quoted in a profile of Pollock by Berton Roueché in the August 5, 1950, issue of the *New Yorker*, reprinted in ibid., p. 19). And one has only to look at Krasner's "Little Image" paintings of 1948–49, painted from the outset in allover patterning, to understand that the question of framing was at the center of the discussions between the two of them.



Jackson Pollock. Two drawings. 1938–41.

formalist investigation, the question of the aesthetic, economic, and institutional status of the painting as such, i.e., of painting's entire corpus, and proving thus, as Barthes used to say, that formalism fails to set its object in motion only by the restrictions that it puts upon itself, by the censorship that it tolerates.[12] A little formalism limits us to the object; a lot of it frees us from it.

It remains that, at least empirically, the question of the edge-to-edge persists, finding its raison d'être, as we know, solely in the case of an afocal surface where, coming together equally, we have both the hypothesis of an unlimited field and the necessity of cutting that field—the ambivalence of this segmenting. Hints: It is not insignificant that in a particular drawing from the 1930s, featuring ocellated and vermiculated motifs spreading themselves over the surface, Pollock singled out, by means of a stark sepia "frame," a fragment having all the characteristics of a pictorial composition.[13] Neither is it insignificant that, at the beginning of the 1940s, he sometimes built his figural canvases and drawings out of interlocking rectangles, a marquetry that functioned metonymically only by including within its logic both the edge and the entire painting as details (*Guardians of the Secret*, 1943).

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[12] Roland Barthes, "Digressions" (1971 in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 993–94. English translation in Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 115.

[13] Editor's note: The drawing to which Clay alludes here (and which he illustrated above right) is no. 633 in the catalogue raisonné of Pollock's work, vol. 3, p. 165, where it is dated "c. 1939–42."

Nor is it insignificant that so many of his works on paper around 1938 showed nothing in the way of compositional order and were nothing other than an egalitarian graffiti of animalcules, faces, and silhouettes arranged next to one another, edge to edge, and the expansion of which was only prevented by the physical limits of the paper itself.[14] One further hint: the "Pollock Museum" conceived by the architect Peter Blake with the artist's blessing (they had known each other since 1947), the maquette of which was exhibited in 1950 at the Betty Parsons Gallery (it can be seen on a table in Namuth's photos) and about which Arthur Drexler wrote in January of the same year in the magazine *Interiors*:

> The pictures are heavily pigmented designs whose continuous rhythms often appear to end because there was no canvas left for more, and Mr. Blake feels that their distinguishing characteristics are best revealed by open space and by the absence of frames. The paintings seem as though they might very well be extended indefinitely, and it is precisely this quality that has been emphasized in the central unit of the plan. Here a painting 17' long constitutes an entire wall. It is terminated on both ends not by a frame or a solid partition, but by mirrors. The painting is thus extended into miles of reflected space, and leaves no doubt in the observer's mind as to this particular aspect of Pollack's [*sic*] work.[15]

We should reckon also with what Pollock took from his time in the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop in 1936 (for he came out of that *as well*). Did he retain from it, as some claim, only operational techniques such as the transportable mural, the dripping, the Duco paint? Siqueiros's expressive muralism included techniques of framing, cutting out, montage, and superimposition, and Siqueiros himself was inspired, in part, by the first Soviet generation: photomontage, *Kino-Pravda*, Eisenstein's "collision montage," and even the latter's "dynamic square," extendable on all sides.[16] A parenthetical task would be to analyze, from the standpoint of painting, the underlying principle of Eisenstein's "collision montage," i.e., to examine exactly what is produced out of the relationship between the *inside* and the *outside* of an image, between, on the one hand, the combination of planes (the shock of fragment against fragment) and, on the other, the fractioning of each fragment (of each image) into antagonistic polarities, with the whole constituting, dialectically, the fabric of the film—the latter being always an organized fragment, a new combination cipher of the world that is itself seen as the potential object of a general montage.[17]

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[14] The drawing that Clay reproduces to illustrate his point here is no. 603/r in Pollock's catalogue raisonné (p. 144, left), where it is dated "c. 1939–42."

[15] Arthur Drexler, "Unframed Space; a Museum for Jackson Pollack's Paintings," *Interiors*, January 1950, p. 90.

[16] In 1945, among his comments on Eisenstein's time in Mexico and on his direction of the unfinished *¡Que Viva México!,* Siqueiros wrote: "Monumental and therefore public material, it was comparable to our own mural painting." David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Art and Revolution* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), p. 86.

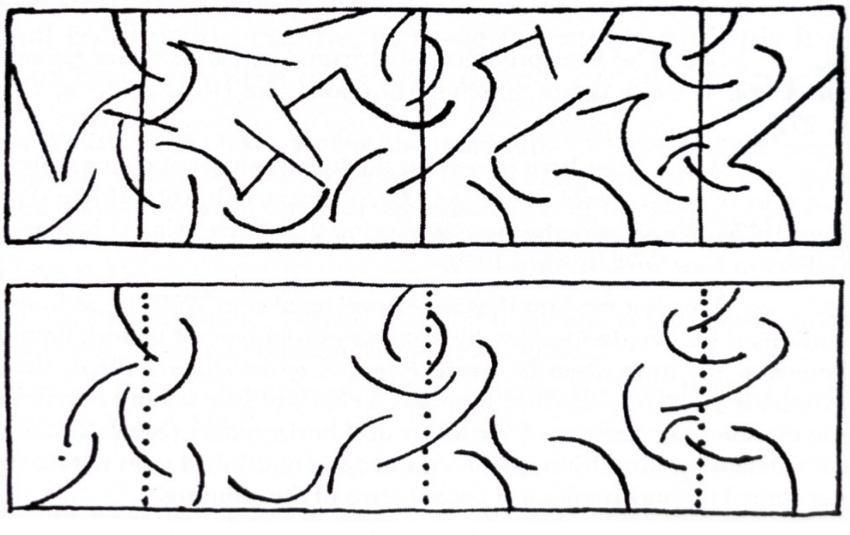
Finally, we should examine, along with Stephen Polcari,[18] the influence of Benton's teaching on Pollock (the artist studied under Benton from 1930 to 1932), and in particular, we should consider the diagrams Benton encouraged his students to use in order to facilitate the rhythmic construction of their paintings. This is Benton's method involving "poles": vertical bars (drawn or imaginary) distributed regularly over the width of the canvas and intended to apportion the zones of tension thanks to a play of curves and counter-curves arranged around each "pole." It is a procedure that recalls Matisse's (or Ingres's) plumb line, but here multiplied ad infinitum.[19] The method facilitates horizontality and the unlimited expansion of the painting according to a lateral dynamic that is evocative also of Japanese scroll painting. We find this procedure in Pollock, for example, in his *Mural* of 1943 (or in *There Were Seven in Eight,* c. 1945), and again in his "polyptychs" of 1950–52, where we see, spaced out in so many stations, compact scenes that follow on, one after another, like the frames of a film (in *Blue Poles,* however, the use of linear scansions appears more of a late addition rather than a means of construction).[20]

[17] S. M. Eisenstein, "Pantagruel Will Be Born," in *S. M. Eisenstein Writings, 1922–1934,* ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), pp. 246–49. See also S. M. Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," in *The Eisenstein Reader,* ed. Richard Taylor, trans. Richard Taylor and William Powell (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), pp. 82–92.

[18] Stephen Polcari, "Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton," *Arts Magazine* (March 1979), pp. 120–24. Reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews,* pp. 192–201.

[19] Clay is alluding here to a famous paragraph from Matisse's *Jazz,* which begins (and ends), "My curves are not mad." It continues: "The plumb line in determining the vertical direction forms with its opposite, the horizontal, the draughtsman's points of the compass. Ingres used a plumb line." (Jack Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, p. 172).

[20] Editor's note: Pollock did not actually make polyptychs. What Clay is referring to here are horizontal strips of canvases on which are painted separated vertical configurations, later to be cut out as independent works. One of Namuth's photos shows such a "polyptych," and one is properly documented in O'Connor and Thaw's catalogue raisonné of Pollock's work (nos. 303–309, vol. III, pp. 122–23).



Diagrams by T. H. Benton.

These are so many hints, but there is much more. Let us now move from the standpoint of empirical, positivistic observation to that of what Meyer Schapiro calls the *image-substance.* Inchoate, expansive painting has the power, as we know, to set to work non-figured energies, to hold as operational data that are virtual (or formalized beforehand). Contemporary art is often *performative* (the work comes into being only through the gaze that completes it), it abounds in productions that are like so many work sites where a great deal remains to be done in order to prolong (or alter) the opening proposition—an incomplete grid, a chance arrangement of a color scheme, etc. In mentioning Pollock's drawings from 1930–40, as well as the drawings, silkscreens, and figural paintings of 1951, I recalled that very often he used to juxtapose images that, in their tabular, egalitarian, additive distribution, answered to no organic coherence (certain of them seem to be closely set in an invisible grid). They bear relation only to the phantasmatic register, that of the "rebus," and not the "pictorial composition" (to borrow Freud's famous definition of the dream).[21]

To the extent to which no centripetal arrangement and no compositional heteronomy holds together these disparate figures set side by side, the internal economy of the work is turned inside out. A centrifugal force dissociates, carries away, and disperses the floating images, doubling them even beyond the frame, as we see, for example, in Torres Garcia, where the non-hierarchized buildup of pictograms, reinforced by the insistence of a regular grid, calls for an unlimited expansion of the field.[22] Or take again certain of Miró's *Constellations* (1940–41) that have often been likened to Pollock's "classic" works. Here discrete elements, ovoid forms scattered edge to edge, produce an active, swarming, and extendable surface. In contrast, with Paul Klee (also frequently likened to Pollock), a *deliberate,* textural, and chromatic border work often leads to an enclosing, disengaging, and raising of the central plane against a background, working thus against this plane's expansion (any suspension of the allover's proliferation requires an indisputable *gesture*).

Can a reading that subordinates a painting's "breathing" outside the frame to the nature of its internal structure[23] be applied to Pollock's allover works of

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[21] See "The Interpretation of Dreams" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 4, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), chap. 6, "The Dreamwork," p. 277.

[22] Angel Kelenberg notes that the juxtaposition of pictograms elicits from the viewer something like a work of cinematic montage (*Torres Garcia,* exh. cat., Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, June 1975). We should also note in passing that Torres Garcia had a solo exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in April 1950.

[23] This is a reading that we can relate also to Wölfflin, as long as we reverse certain of his conclusions if we decide to apply his categories to a type of pictorial organization that he could not have known at the time when he wrote *Principles of Art History* (1915), since it was in the process of being invented. Thus, for Wölfflin, what was a characteristic feature of *tectonic* (closed) composition, namely, the extreme valorization of verticality and horizontality (beams of the cross), tends to become *atectonic* with Delaunay, Mondrian, and Klee once it is multiplied so as to form a lattice that neutralizes and renders equal the morphological constituents of the painting.

1947–50?[24] In the "classic" paintings of this period, Pollock stands at a halfway point between two opposing organizations of the surface: There is neither a compositional arrangement of the surface nor is there a complete lack of differentiation. There is no composition because there is no static equilibrium of masses or linear formants responding to one another in the internal economy of the canvas. Through saturation and re-layering, the webs are prevented from forming any sorts of figures, and prevented even from suggesting any movement or direction. Pollock takes to the extreme Stzremiński's statement "A line in Baroque is conceived as a sign of a directed tension. Every Baroque line is a dynamic sign. Every line is closed by another which it meets. A clash of lines produces a closing of a picture."[25] Pollock's painting is "closed," therefore, through the accumulation and interweaving of the networks. But the fragmentation of the linear constituents (what William Rubin has called, in connection with the Impressionists, "the molecularization of the paint surface") is not such as to annul all morphological oppositions, a tendency (never fully achieved) that we see with Stzremiński's *Unist Compositions*, certain of Dubuffet's *Texturologies*, or Yves Klein's *Monochromes*. There is a *reduction* in scale of the visual formants, the patches and lines, but there is no annihilation of all difference. As Greenberg notes,

> An "all-over" Pollock makes the impression of being chaotic because it promises the order of mechanical repetition only to betray it. An "all-over" Pollock is only vaguely, ambiguously symmetrical. When it is pictorially effective and moves and excites the viewer, it does so in the same general way in which all pictorial art does, by disrupting and restoring, by unbalancing and balancing.[26]

In the conjunctive tissue formed by the whole of Pollock's overlain interweavings, there do persist nuclei—areas that are more dense, and whose interactions give rise to an active, simmering, and pounding surface. The energizing circulations work like so many micro-montages, in the sense in which Eisenstein, in reference to "conflict within the shot," speaks of "potential montage that, in its growing intensity, breaks through its four-sided cage," comparing this effect to "the series of explosions of the internal combustion engine, as these fragments multiply into a montage dynamic through 'impulses' like those that drive a car or a tractor."[27]

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[24] This is the position that William Rubin takes, writing about Mondrian's "intermediate" works in 1913, when he states, "Mondrians like *Composition No. 7* have smaller and more numerous forms than 1911–12 Picassos and they are distributed with such approximate evenness over the surface that they *certainly qualify as all-over lattices*." "Impressionism and the Classic Pollock," *Artforum* (April 1967), p. 23, reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews*, p. 156.

[25] Wladyslaw Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting" [1928], trans. Piotr Graff and Ewa Krasińska, in *Constructivism in Poland 1923–1936* (Essen: Museum Folkwang Essen, 1973), p. 86.

[26] Clement Greenberg, "Jackson Pollock: 'Inspiration, Vision, Intuitive Decision,'" *Vogue* (April 1967), reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews*, p. 111.

[27] Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, p. 88.

Even if it is true that the tangled netting curves itself back at the edges in a move towards closure, and even if a reserved zone seems to shore up, here and there, the meanderings of the pigment, this motility of the surface, once it escapes any compositional re-centering, tends towards expansion. The textural proliferation of the paint layer contradicts the (moreover relative) fencing in of the networks. What the line encloses is thrown out again by the infinite abundance of the networks, and the allover (systole and diastole) proves itself less by the edge-to-edge covering of the field than by the strategy of the tension in which it is inscribed, and it is precisely this tension that constitutes the very artwork itself. Taking our cue from the semantic snare that holds the term "allover" prisoner (it is used mostly to denounce its misuse: "The allover is not allover!"), we have to admit, *allover or not*, that a principle of contradiction nourishes the inexhaustible vitality of the work—a suspense, an aporia, in which, irreducible to discourse, our pleasure finds its climax. (This is equally true in Poussin, where the muted instability of the color eats away at and undoes the linear and geometrical organization. It can be seen also in the ordered ambivalence of sign and flat brushwork in Cézanne, in Léger's unsteady line, in Mondrian's "dynamic equilibrium," etc.) A "machine" is at work here, telling us perhaps something about Pollock's choice of format. Since if, despite the legend, he painted few large-scale canvases (even though doing many of them would have been eminently justified by the procedure of dripping), it is perhaps in part because average-sized formats were enough to *contain* a potentially unlimited isotropic expanse.

As William Rubin notes in his 1967 essay, "In keeping with the all-over principle, the color would have to be distributed with approximate evenness, each quadrant of the canvas (and sometimes even the smaller subdivisions) having at least some of every color used."[28] Composed entirely of details, a work by Pollock is equally well contained within each detail. It is infinitely divisible. Each rectangle (and each rectangle within the rectangle) gives rise to the same infinity effect as the surface of the whole. Historical parallels abound here, beginning with Rubin's well-known comparison of Pollock's work with Impressionism. But one could also look at Pollock through Seurat (and Seurat through Pollock). It is doubtless no accident that, at the beginning of the 1950s (while the question of the simultaneous contrast of colors, unchanged since Fénéon continued to be rehashed in Paris), Meyer Schapiro was able to isolate Seurat's originality, at the very moment, therefore, when Pollock's work was starting to have a dominant impact on the American scene.[29] At first glance, these two painters have nothing in common. On the level of the artistic gesture, the contrast appears so great as to be systematic. On the one side, a precise and repetitive punctuating, a restrained bodily economy, a highly efficient mechanical sifting;[30] the equivalent of which, Schapiro points out, is to be looked for in the work conditions of proto-industrial manufacturing.[31] On the other side, we have a tangled web, widely diffused over the whole of the surface, with a relative share of chance, and a pulling away before the touching of the canvas (the stick often holds back the flow at least as much as it encourages it) and a few traces of hands, here and there, as if to disavow the avoidance. But there is also a pulling away from the point. Michael Fried speaks of "an opulent and [. . .] homogeneous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives his eye nowhere to rest once and for all. That is, Pollock's all-over drip paintings refuse to bring one's attention to a focus anywhere."[32] This is painting, therefore, without a point, without a center, without a target, as if the artist were operating like a Zen archer, i.e., without aiming at the target, utterly nullifying Alberti's instruction to painters: " . . . let one have no doubt that he who attempts to depict objects without a deep understanding of them will never become a good painter. One draws the bow in vain, in fact, if you have not established where to direct the arrow."[33]

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[28] Rubin, "Impressionism and the Classic Pollock," p. 33 (p. 143 in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews*).

[29] Meyer Schapiro, "Seurat," in *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), pp. 101–09.

But to defer the point (Pollock) or to multiply it (Seurat) comes down to the same thing once we accept that the point, in Western space, is always the anchoring of a scene, the operator of a projective surface, the vector of an illusory depth, the promotor of the third dimension (as Greenberg said, "The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness").[34] The point is always a *centric point* (in the dual sense of composition and perspective), and Seurat's trick, unconscious or otherwise, boils down, mainly in his sketches (*Les Poseuses, La Tour Eiffel*), to destroying by excess its organizational function. A polychrome carapace is extended (Fénéon's "monotonic and patient spotted tapestry") in which the grain clogs the field of fiction (Seurat's pointillist disciples, and then Delaunay, Mondrian, and Klee, were to further exploit and accentuate the frontal, tabular, and merismatic propensity of the surface).

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[30] Robert Herbert has stressed the gains in productivity obtained by Seurat's method. During the last seven years of his short life, the artist painted "six monumental canvases, thirty-four of average size, seventy small panels (and over one hundred of his mature drawings)." *Neo-Impressionism* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1968), p. 21.

[31] " . . . a worker who spends his life performing one simple operation over and over again turns his whole body into an automatic, specialized organ of that operation . . . " Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Paul Reitter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 311. At the same time, we should recall that the invention of the *halftone* (1880), ensuring the merismatic transformation of photography and allowing for reproduction in the press, is contemporary with Seurat, although its diffusion was to be slow (cf. Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society*, trans. Richard Dunn et al. [Boston: David R. Godine], p. 104). This invention involved the mechanical transfer of the image and its definition by means of a determined quantity of "lines" that constitute its dot screen. Unlike neo-Impressionism, the photo-engraving in black reproduces the gradation of values by unequal dots. It still remains, however, that in both cases the whole image is produced by the accumulation of discrete units that have no iconic relation with the referent. The analogy with Seurat's drawing technique is perhaps even more striking: The artist used Ingres paper with a regular screen pattern whose grain retained, to varying extents, the Conté-pencil layer. There is uniformity in the texture (grain), but variation in the value (white to black).

[32] Michael Fried, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum), p. 14. Reprinted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 224.

[33] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 43.

[34] "Modernist Painting" (1960), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), p. 90.

Pollock works tremendously hard at erasing the vanishing point (and the viewpoint that, in specular terms, justifies it), any punctuation finding itself shut out immediately in the interlacing flow moving over the surface of the canvas. This is melancholic painting, full of dream and dance, producing " . . . a finely structured surface made up of an infinite number of superposed units attached to the canvas."[35] The comparison can easily be extended to the texture. Although, as Schapiro notes, we can see in Seurat "relatively homogenous dots" made up of "uniform particles," if we look closely at it, it is clear that it is not without an extreme variety of brushstrokes, from the minuscule *pointillé* to touches that are longitudinal. The evenness is not due to the pigmentary constituents' being absolutely identical one to another, but rather to the absence of any polarities that would render more dense certain areas of the painting. It is an irregular fabric, and yet it is irregular in the same way over all the painting's surface. As William Rubin has shown, this was also the case with Pollock.[36]

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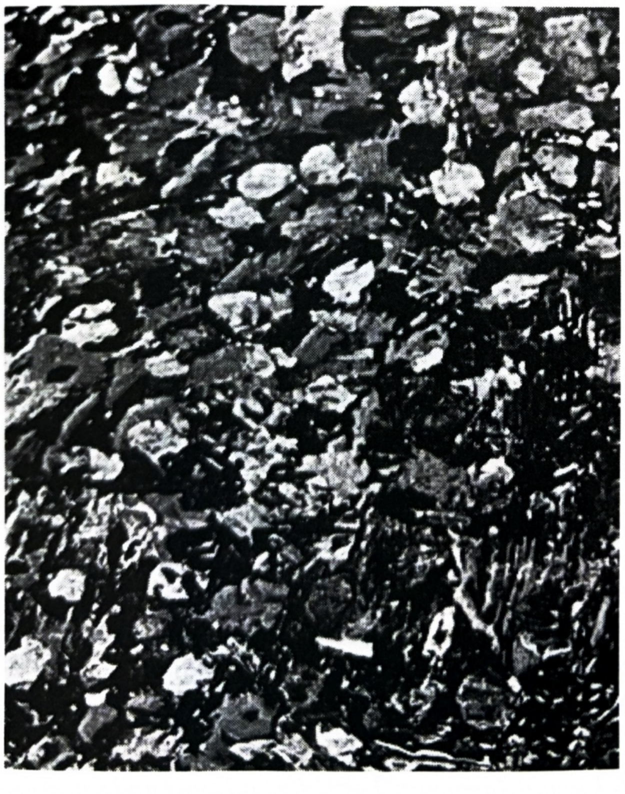
[35] These are Meyer Schapiro's terms—but he is writing about Seurat. See "Seurat," p. 102.

[36] "The virtues of Pollock's classic pictures are due in part to his having introduced such great variety in their local sub-units while still making these cohere in an organically, unified whole." Rubin, "Impressionism and the Classic Pollock," p. 19 (p. 131 in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews*).



Georges Seurat. Detail of Model in Profile. *1886–87.*

And finally, we have perhaps not emphasized enough the work of superimposition, which is clear, for example, in its details, in sketches for *Les Poseuses*. With Seurat, every touch is reactive. Point summons counterpoint. Each touch reinforces or contradicts a touch that is already there. The proceeding is like a bombardment of *discrete units*, distributed according to layers that articulate themselves on already existing layers. It is because the texture is made up of "relatively homogeneous" discrete elements that the work appears to us as an ordered superimposition of layers. The pigmentary mass "unfolds" itself in a certain number of overlapping strata that between them have enough similarity to make a system. Pollock's "contrapuntal" painting (to take up an old word of Motherwell's)[37] also presents this quality of an ordered articulation of discrete elements. Even if, *morphologically*, Pollock's meshes have nothing to do with Seurat's little points, *structurally* they have similar qualities. Despite their diversity in terms of thickness and treatment, these meshes establish between themselves a relation of solidarity that has to do with their continuity, their curves, and, more generally, the physical procedure that made them possible. When the ability to articulate was lacking, Pollock's painting became stuck, clogged—the netting that had once been interlaced became fixed in an opaque and viscous mass. *The Deep* (1953), with its heavy, creamy flows and its mortuary void, was a last hiccup.[38]

In Mondrian's work, reading it by way of Pollock, we can see various attempts at articulating depth (depth as articulation). But at the time when Mondrian was elaborating his thoughts on Cubism (1912–19), he did not have the means available to him to think the difference between atmospheric depth, with all that that entails of the trivial, the anecdotal, and the "tragic" (let us call it the *extensum*), and structural depth (call it the *spatium*). And if he gives up on the latter (not without perpetual revisitings), it is because he could not annihilate the naturalistic effects of the former. He lacked what Greenberg was to identify as a fundamental feature of Pollock's system, namely, the invention (in his case thanks to the stratification of the meshwork and its allover distribution) of "shallow depth" (*spatium*) determined exclusively by the (linear-chromatic) visual constituents.[39] A space is pro-

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37. [Editor's note: In the original publication of this essay, Clay placed an insert at this juncture consisting of a long quotation from Robert Motherwell's contribution to "Jackson Pollock: An Artists Symposium. Part I," *Artnews* (April 1967), p. 65, reprinted in *The Writings of Robert Motherwell,* Dore Ashton, ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. 227. The last sentence of this quote is "Finally, working on the floor, the automatic drips would not further spread or move, and he could paint 'contrapuntally,' that is, in layer after layer, and reach a physical complexity that none of his colleagues could."]

38. A hollowed-out space, offering itself to the dumbfounded gaze like a wound, lips, Medusa. The gaze perhaps of C. D. Friedrich, painting caves, ravines, grottoes, and other stitch-resistant holes. This is also the look of Beckett's gravedigger: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps." Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press), p. 339.

39. Editor's note: Clay had translated Greenberg's "shallow depth" into "*profondeur plate*" (literally: "flat depth"), which appears to be a misunderstanding. Greenberg's "shallow depth" is the "not very deep," "optical depth" that he perceived in analytical Cubism and, revising his previous position, began to associate with Pollock's "classic" works of the late 1950s. In other words, Greenberg's "shallow depth" is illusionistic and has nothing to do with what Clay has in mind when he speaks of "flat depth."

duced in Pollock's work (even if it might be vertiginous) without the interposition, at any stage in the procedure, of a referent taken from empirical reality (through a sedimentary decanting) and without, furthermore, the setting up of any figure/ground opposition that might reinstate, all things being equal, the same illusionistic spatiality.[40]

This rupture, we might point out in passing, insofar as it excludes the figure/ground opposition as much as it does the iconic referent, was something that Concrete art, coming out of Van Doesburg (*Arithmetic Composition*, 1930) and the teachings of Paul Klee, had achieved in its own way by eliciting the intervention *a priori* of a system of mathematical distribution that derived from the proportions of the painting and that was even entrusted, in certain cases, with producing them.

What Mondrian missed, what he repressed through his methodical research into a flatness with no remainder, would therefore be the possibility of an unfolding back *into itself* of the surface—a structural depth (*spatium*). And yet, as we know,[41] nothing was more foreign to Mondrian than the exclusion of one of a pair of opposites. The concept of *opheffing* (the Dutch equivalent of *Aufhebung*) is at work in his texts as much as in his art. The question of depth always returns, as if the artist tended towards frontality only to ceaselessly come back to what it nullified: fluttering rectangles (1917); chromatic variations of a regular grid (1919); untouched marginal areas (1921–23); disproportion of colored, flat, solid patches; relief of white backgrounds that overhang black lines; multiple overlappings of these same lines, creating optical stimulation (1930s and 1940s); etc.

Let us compare Mondrian's compositions of 1913–16 with the cubist model that inspired them. In Mondrian, as Rubin notes, the vertical-horizontal grid that subtends the painting is much more regular than in Picasso or Braque. But, above all, one can see that generally it reaches the immediate proximity of the edge and is then blurred by a translucid layer of pigment. The grid is therefore given and then erased—inscribed, then repressed towards depth. The grid is wiped out but visible (as if the "ground" had been painted after the fact, applied later to the composition). And this method is not used only for the peripheral areas; it can be detected, here and there, over the entire surface (variant: the lines get thinner, frayed by the pigment). This is a procedure of submerging or burying, a half-erasure, as if the painter, caught up in a game of hide-and-seek, had resigned himself to the painting's frontal assertion only on the condition of being able, allusively, to contradict it (see also the cubist and curvilinear *Trees* of 1912).

The same hidden presences are there in the series of signed drawings Mondrian did that show the church at Domburg.[42] In his work of geometrical simplification of the "motif," the artist makes the decision to multiply the superimpositions of grids (nothing of which is suggested in the frontality of the referent), going so far as to produce, by erasures and re-coverings, an echo structure (*spatium*)—the seduction of remorse in Mondrian, the softness of the "stump effects" on the charcoal drawing and of the gouache white-outs hemming in and veiling the China-ink tracings. We see here the beginnings, almost, of a method: show, erase, show that one erases. This is a method that takes its shape, its depth—as we saw with Pollock and Seurat—only by putting into relation (blurred or otherwise) elements that are identical to one another, comparable discrete units.

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[40] For more on the opposition between "tactile" and "optical" space, see the explanation of Greenberg's position put forward by Rosalind Krauss in "Emblèmes ou lexies: le texte photographique," *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock* (original English text, "Reading Photographs as Text," in *Pollock Painting: Photographs by Hans Namuth*, np).

[41] See my introduction to "Jazz et néo-plasticisme," *Macula* no. 1 (1976), p. 78.

[42] Those drawings are nos. B57, B58, B59, B60, B61, B71, and B72 of the catalogue raisonné of Mondrian's work of 1911–44 established by Joop M. Joosten (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), vol. 2.

According to Robert P. Welsh,[43] the Domburg drawings are so many studies for the painting that is now in the Guggenheim Museum, *Composition 1916*. In this painting, we can see how the color, accompanying, relaying, and transposing the effects of the meshwork we have just described, functions in its turn like a surface interweaving. The painting contains two color modalities (as we find, albeit transformed, in the later work): sometimes the pigment stops in immediate proximity to the black bar that adjoins it (leaving an infinitesimally thin clear reserve), and sometimes, breaking the lines, it works by partial re-coverings of shades, by tabs of color that impinge on each other rather than fitting together neatly. It is by means of this imbrication (from the Latin *imbrex*, meaning tile) of small areas of color, distributed evenly, that the surface is constructed—a mode of construction that amounts to a systematization and simplification of Cézanne's "passages." In place of the indeterminate quality of the cubist painting (with regard to the background as layer and as illusion of depth) there is substituted a latticework, a tapestry that owes its cohesion and its autonomy only to its system of overlappings, and where precisely nothing forms a background (the effect achieved by Pollock, although by other means).

With *Composition with Grid 3: Lozenge Composition, 1918* (Gemeentemuseum, The Hague), Mondrian came closest to a structural understanding of depth (*spatium*), i.e., of "flat depth" (see also *Composition with Grid 2, 1918*).[44] The work here is extreme, with the artist superimposing lattices made up of discrete units that are sufficiently comparable so as to form a system (like Pollock's meshwork). If it were not for the irregularities of thickness in the vertical and horizontal lines, we would even be in the presence of an anticipation of Concrete art, since the grid, distributed allover, is produced by the regular division of the sides. Structure supplants nature. However, this formal and theoretical advance finds itself re-interpreted by language in which nature

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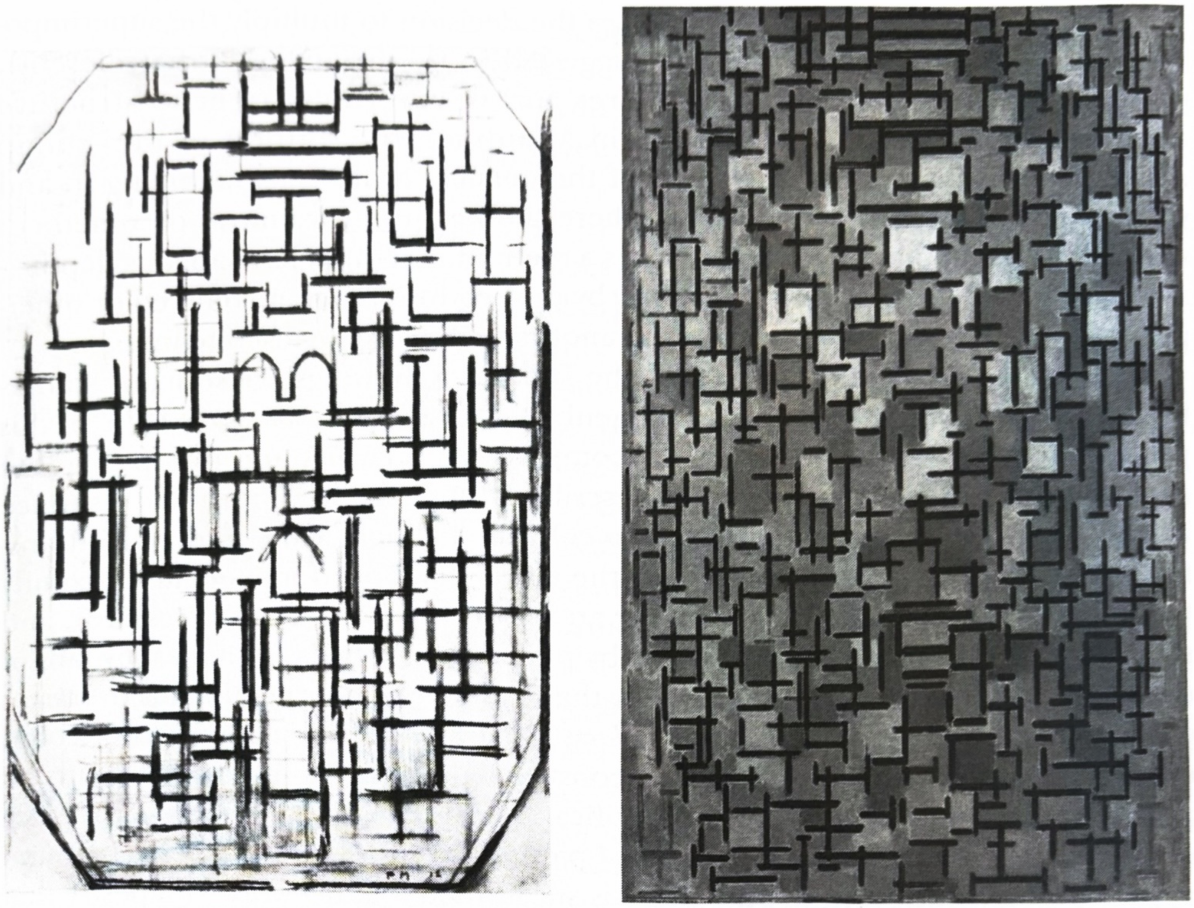
[43] See Robert Welsh, "Mondrian as Draftsman," in *Mondrian: Drawings, Watercolors, New York Paintings*, exh. cat. (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie, 1980), pp. 35–62.

[44] Editor's note: The first of these two paintings is no. B97 in Joosten's catalogue raisonné; the second, which from 1980 to 2009 was in the collection of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, is no. B96 (first state) *and* B305 (second state). In the full-page black-and-white reproduction included in Michel Seuphor's monograph on Mondrian (*Piet Mondrian: Sa vie, son oeuvre* [Paris: Flammarion, 1956], p. 265), one can clearly see the modular division of the surface by thin graphite lines, the module being a vertical rectangle of the same proportions as the whole picture.



Piet Mondrian. Domburg Church Tower, *1914, left, and* Composition, *1916, right.*

(*extensum*) makes its return: Mondrian writes to Van Doesburg in August 1919, saying of one of his diamond paintings that it was "a starry sky which first inspired me to produce it."[45] But this image is itself a bearer of meaning: the "alphabet of the stars" such as it is written "in the folio of the sky" (Mallarmé)[46] always emerges when it is a question of metaphorizing the ambivalence of the page or canvas, when "every individual distinctive feature" (Mondrian) is annulled, and when something is produced that is tied to the surface but functions at the same time (paragram, painting) as an ordered, active, and articulated depth. The sky is the commonplace that names that common place where Miró's *Constellations*, Pollock's interweavings, and Mondrian's lattices all coincide.

From 1919 onwards, as Mondrian pursued a more pronounced flattening in his painting, the structural interference of the lattices became less present. Rectangles and squares neutralize the field, even if, as E. A. Carmean notes, in one of the two "diamonds" at the Kröller-Müller Museum [*Composition with Grid 5:*

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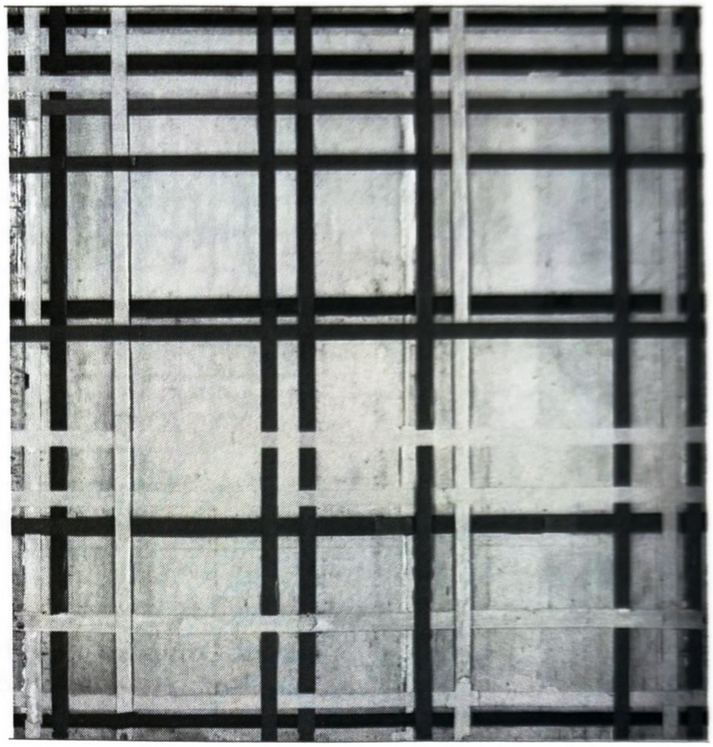
[45] Cited by E. A. Carmean in his catalogue *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1979), p. 24.

[46] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations,* trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 216 and 119.



Mondrian.
New York City II. *1942–44.*

Lozenge Composition with Colors, 1919] a linear grid, dividing up the surface, is still barely visible "faintly under the colors."[47]

The issue of depth was to resurface in Mondrian fifteen years later, after the "classic" period, precipitated by the growing complexity of the black lines, until it was to triumph in the *New York City* paintings, in which the principle of a strictly pictorial depth (*spatium*) is clearly recognizable, expressed by the systematic overlapping of the colored lines and even, with *New York City II* and *III*,[48] by the effective weaving of strips of adhesive tape.[49]

The studies on paper and the unfinished works of 1936–44 (here the unfinished is a genre) are so many instances in which a change in direction of a work in progress becomes justified (and developed). What is the source of our pleasure before these scraps, these ruins that show the future of a work (the future of painting), in which the wear and tear of time and the fumbling of the artist are mixed together in the crushed dust of the charcoal, in the paint smudges, and in the torn adhesive? We see, as they fall apart, the pictorial constituents—lines, flat planes, colors—that will reappear in another form, in another *distribution,* as if obeying the imperious ploughing forward of a signifier that we might call, in its obstinacy,

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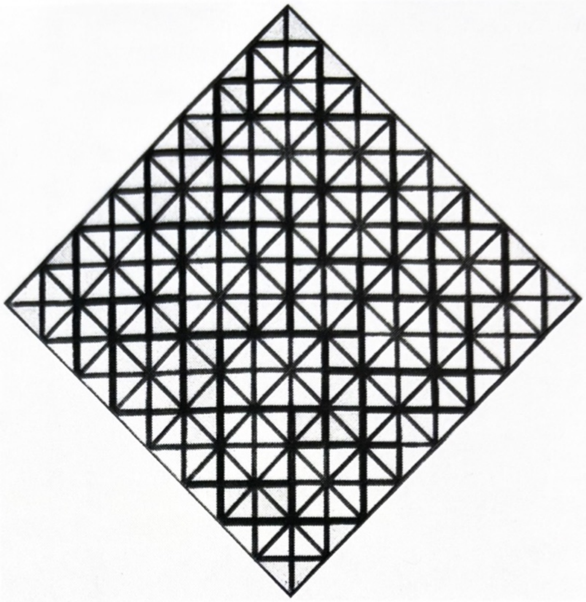
[47] Carmean, p. 28.

[48] Editor's note: The two works (with strips of adhesive tape) mentioned by Clay are nos. 300 and 302 in the catalogue raisonné.

[49] This is a return to latticework, which Gottfried Semper saw as the "root form," the origin of walls and architecture. See Joseph Rykwert, "Semper and the Conception of Style," in *Gottfried Semper und die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Basel und Stuttgart: Birkhauser Verlag, 1976), pp. 67–81.



Mondrian. Composition with Grid 3: Lozenge Composition. *1918.*

blind: blind to the obvious program, blind to the technical and aesthetic presuppositions. And thus in Mondrian, we see thickness coming into being like the forced expression of a gene, shot through with the problematics of the surface, and taken to its ultimate limit, which is its own overturning.[50] Thus in Pollock the experiment of a saturation (rice paper, cotton duck) that congeals and buries in the texture of the subjectile the wide and rapid gesture of the allover. And thus also in Seurat's sketches, where the *pointillé* frees itself, crumbling apart the silhouettes and producing itself as grain, surface—the warp and weft of a weaving.

—Translation from the French by Nicholas Huckle

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[50] See Christian Bonnefoi's analysis in "Sur l'apparition du visible," an interview published in *Macula*, no. 5–6 (1979), p. 205.

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Gauguin, Nietzsche, Aurier: Notes on Symbolism's Material Inversion*

JEAN CLAY

> *Musicians find enjoyment through the ear, but we, with our insatiable and rutting eye, taste pleasures that are endless.*
>
> —Paul Gauguin, letter to Émile Schuffenecker, September 1888

> *Art, as the artist practices it—do you not grasp what it is: a murderous assault against all forms of decency?*
>
> —Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments,* Autumn 1887

Among all the commonplaces borne along by art history, one of the least debatable is the opposition that appeared at the turn of the 1890s between symbolism and naturalism. From Schiller to Baudelaire, writers and philosophers had railed against the market society and the supreme power of "utility," and their imprecations were now to be taken up and amplified. In the midst of what Remy de Gourmont described, in 1892, as "the base slavery where we grovel, a dotard people," any aesthetic approach that took as its object contemporary reality, or indeed reality of any sort, was felt to be ignoble. "The myopic copying of social anecdotes" was scarcely more scandalous than "the imbecilic imitation of the warts of nature" (Aurier, 1892 [p. 608]).[1] The anathema struck not only the realism that

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* This text was published in October 1982 in the catalogue for the exhibition *L'Éclatement de l'impressionnisme* at the Musée départemental du Prieuré, Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Reprinted in *L'Inactuel* no. 5, Spring 1996.

[1] The writer Gabriel-Albert Aurier, whom we shall be following especially in this text, was the main critical writer on symbolist painting; at any rate, he was the most tenacious in constructing a theory of it. In less than three years (he died in October 1892, at the age of twenty-seven), Aurier published the first substantial studies in favor of Van Gogh and Gauguin. At the same time, in a series of articles that were just as much manifestos, he formulated and tried to establish a Neoplatonic theory of art that he

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emerged out of Courbet, dismissed by Maurice Denis in 1895 as an "unconscious genius [who] proffered legendary stupidities,"[2] but also Impressionism. Aurier considered the latter to be "a refined, spiritualized, dilettante realism, but a realism all the same" (1891 [p. 367]), although he was to add some nuance to this in 1892. Denis was to explain much later, "We were reacting with magnanimity against what was low, vulgar, and mediocre in the schools that had immediately preceded us, against the materialism and naturalism that were then in vogue."[3]

In this struggle, the painters, who were called successively cloisonnists, synthetists, neo-traditionists, ideists, symbolists, and deformers,[4] relied tactically (and confusedly) on a number of philosophical, religious, and poetical references. Denis spoke of "a unique mixture of Plotinus, Edgar Poe, Baudelaire, and Schopenhauer."[5] Bernard yearned for "the coming of an art that would be itself *an artist,* a mystical, idealist, thinking art."[6] And Filiger, a little later, summing up his approach, was to write, "What I seek is to give a concrete form to abstract ideas by means of a few simple formulae, in accord with the eternal logic without which nothing is true and all remains without significance . . . "[7]

But it is mainly Aurier, the writer and poet, who was to try to make a coherent doctrine out of the vague aspirations of painters. Pushing against the naturalist creed and going back past the theory of ideal beauty that had dominated the French classical age, Aurier encouraged a strict return to the Platonic concept of the *Idea.* The artist must be the "expresser of absolute beings," seeing in the objects of the world "relative beings that are only the translation, proportional to the relativity of our intellect, of absolute and essential beings, the Ideas" (1891 [p. 370]). Aurier claimed for painters the right " . . . to be preoccupied [. . .] by this ideist substratum that is everywhere in the universe, and that, according to Plato, is the sole true reality—the rest being only appearance, only shadows." And he argued further, " . . . In nature, every object is only, at bottom, a signified Idea [. . .] all the elements of pictorial language, lines, planes, shadows, light, col-

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called *ideism.* In my text, I shall refer in particular to the following articles: "Les isolés: Vincent Van Gogh," *Mercure de France,* January 1890; "Le symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France,* March 1891; "Les symbolistes," *Revue encyclopédique,* April 1892 [1892a]; and "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art," *Mercure de France,* December 1892 [1892b]. [Editor's note: In 2021, Aurier's *Œuvres complètes,* edited by Julien Schuh, was published by Éditions du Sandre in Paris. From this point on in the text, all page numbers between brackets will refer to this publication.]

[2] Maurice Denis, "À propos de l'exposition d'A. Séguin" (1895), reprinted in *Théories, 1890–1910: Du Symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique* (1912), 4th ed. (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1920), p. 22.

[3] Maurice Denis, "Le Symbolisme et l'art religieux moderne" (1918), reprinted in Denis, *Nouvelles théories sur l'art moderne, sur l'art sacré, 1914–1921* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1922), p. 171.

[4] Denis, "À propos de l'exposition d'A. Séguin," p. 20.

[5] Denis, "Le Symbolisme et l'art religieux moderne," p. 172.

[6] Émile Bernard in the collection *Lettres à Redon,* ed. Arï Redon (Paris: José Corti, 1960), p. 205.

[7] Letter dated February 1907, *Filiger* exh. cat. (Saint-Germain-en-Laye: Musée départemental du Prieuré, 1981), p. 15.

ors," serve no purpose other than "the expression of a given idea, dream, or thought" (1892a [pp. 613–14]).

Beginning in 1890, it was the Idea that Aurier believed he could locate behind Van Gogh's raging style: "In almost all of his canvases, under this morphic envelope, this so real flesh, this so real matter, there lies, for the mind that can see it, a thought, an Idea, and this Idea, the essential substratum of the work, is at the same time its efficient and final cause" (1890 [p. 290]). As for Gauguin, Aurier sees in him, "one could almost say, Plato visually interpreted by a savage of genius" (1892a [p. 616])—a phrase in which we see combined, typically enough, two *states* of a single movement of regression: both towards the original model, the matrix, the concept, innocent still of *any* inscription in matter, *and* towards the primitive, the unpolluted, the geographical sphere untouched by the vices of civilization.

It is thus very much the reference to Plato (used in a positive way)[8] that comes into play in counterattack against naturalism's impoverished and repetitive discourse on the "faithful and simple" representation of everyday life. Mimesis is led back to its point of departure: it is no longer a question of copying the world of appearances, but rather one of returning to the original Idea—unchangeable, universal, eternal—that was deposited into our souls before our descent here below (*Phaedo*, 75b, d).

This reference to Plato is omnipresent in Aurier,[9] and I wish here to interrogate it by showing how the symbolism vs. naturalism opposition works as a system. Beyond the fact that it muddies our view of what it is in symbolism that prolongs and completes impressionism, the main effect of the opposition is to obscure otherwise deep tensions, where it is the relation of the painter to his object, and even his status as author and subject, that is in question.

The first contradiction that arises concerns principally the question of the subject. The "ideist" discourse attempted to combine—and most often was content simply to set side by side—the Platonic definition, which asserted the innateness of a schema always already imprinted in the artist's head, and the "idea" in the sense that it had during the Renaissance (*concetto, pensiero*), i.e., the design in the painter's head before the actual execution of the painting, and referring even to the theme or the "story" that he was to depict. This second definition, once it stressed fully the gestation of the work, could only, ultimately, favor and justify the rise of subjectivity. We find a faint trace of this in Aurier: the "ideist," in order to present the Idea more intensely, can allow himself, he says, expressive deformations.[10] In this way, Aurier makes room for the imaginative faculty and for personal investigations. The whole difficulty, for the theoreticians of symbolism, lay in trying to reconcile the archaizing austerity of Platonism, hostile to any individual creative suggestion[11] or to any originality of line, with the impulses of an era that claimed, and with such great vehemence, the centrality of the subject, the full assumption of the Ego—a claim generally backed up by a partial and often hasty reading of Schopenhauer.[12] Baudelaire's dandy was the exacerbated, but already outdated, social figure of this hypertrophy (consider, for that matter, how the "studious decrepitude" of Huysmans's Des Esseintes ends in delirium and neurosis).

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[8] It is well known that Plato condemned the making of images (simulacra) insofar as they were untrustworthy copies of the objects of the world, the latter being themselves only imperfect projections, unclear copies of the original Ideas. For a discussion of these questions, and on the development of the notion of the Idea up to the French classical age, see Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* [1924], trans. Joseph J. S. Peake (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968).

[9] The schism between essence and appearance is reinforced in Plotinus (a frequent reference for the symbolists), for whom form must *vanquish* matter, the latter being always seen as bad and resistant. Cf. Panofsky, p. 53.

And yet, however strong the contradiction between an often pathetic subjectivism and the immobile serenity of the Platonic Idea might appear, they did have one point of commonality. Whether the source were, even obscurely, Plato, Plotinus, or Ficino, or even Aristotle, it was always a case of ensuring the preeminence of a "good" form (pre-established) at the expense of a substance stamped with the mark of inertia. The duality of form and substance was preserved. But we can see how this duality became, in its turn, unsustainable with the spread of the romantic conception of art such as it was developed at the turn of the nineteenth century, first in Germany and then—thanks to Madame de Staël—in France, where it was embraced by Baudelaire and Delacroix. From its very first suppositions, romanticism gives full vigor to a thought that was found already in Aristotle and the Mannerists: Man creates not *after* nature but *as* nature. Analyzing the ideas of Karl Philipp Mortiz, Tzvetan Todorov writes in his *Theories of the Symbol*: "[For Mortiz] the artist, not the work, copies nature, and he does this by producing works [. . .]: . . . the artist's characteristic capability is a *Bildungskraft*, a formative (or productive) faculty . . . " And Mortiz himself says: "The *born artist* is not content to observe nature, he has to imitate it, take it as his model, he has to form (*bilden*) and create as nature does."[13] This is a thesis we find echoed in Baudelaire's famous statement: "A good picture, faithful and worthy of the dreams which gave it birth, must be created like a world."[14] Like a world: the coming of the "instant of formation," of the "process of production." "The nature of the beautiful," Moritz goes on, "consists in this, that its inner being lies beyond the limits of the power of thought, in its emergence, in its own becoming." This is the theory of the exploding of thought, to be taken up soon by Schelling—a theory that would be devoured by the organic and instinctual conception of art that was to be Delacroix's leitmotif: "We must therefore be almost beyond ourselves if we are to achieve all that we are capable of doing" (*Journal*, January 25, 1857).[15] Delacroix's leitmotif would very soon become that of Gauguin: " . . . my temperament forces me to do a picture feverishly" (to Monfreid, July 13, 1897). " . . . I worked day and night that whole month in an incredible fever. To be sure it is not done like a Puvis de Chavannes, sketch after nature, preparatory cartoon, etc. It is all done straight from the brush on sackcloth full of knots and wrinkles, so the appearance is terribly rough" (to Monfreid, February 1898).[16]

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[10] " . . . the goal being no longer the direct and immediate reproduction of the object, all the elements of pictorial language (lines, planes, shadows, light, color) become, as one will see, abstract elements that can be combined, attenuated, exaggerated, and deformed according to their own expressive modality in order to arrive at the general aim of the work: the expression of a given idea, dream, or thought." G.-A. Aurier (1892a [p. 614]).

[11] Plato, in *The Laws* (II, 656), wonders at the thousand-year permanence of Egyptian art, ruled by strict and intangible principles that people were forbidden from transgressing.

[12] Schopenhauer's massive work, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), had just been translated into French (1888). The thought of disillusion, repetition, spread-out time, and the interchangeable subject was "optimized" in commentaries such as this one from Remy de Gourmont in his *Idealism* (Paris, 1893): "One knows only one's own intelligence, only oneself, the sole reality, the special and unique world that the ego holds, carries, deforms, extenuates, and re-creates according its personal activity; nothing happens outside of the knowing subject; everything that I think is real; my sole reality is thought."

[13] Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* [1977], trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 153–54.

[14] Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1859," in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 305.

With this intense valorization of the instinctual, of improvisation, of the bodily involvement of the painter, we find ourselves at the antipodes of Aurier's Neoplatonic conceptions insofar as they asserted the suprasensible nature of the Idea. Nothing is here carried over onto the canvas that is not *in the very immediate moment* invented. The work is less executed than it is *invested*. If it is necessary to think it in order to do it, then it is also necessary to do it in order to think it. The classical projective theory of art, relayed by Alberti,[17] hammered into shape by Ingres, and still to be found in Kandinsky, was henceforth incompatible with the actual practice of painters.

At a stroke, what I referred to at the outset as the circumstantial, tactical, and polemical aspect of the Neoplatonic reference becomes much clearer. Segalen refers to "the beautiful and healthy bites with which this youth devoured the meat of the—not so much well hung as putrid—naturalist beef."[18] This was a naturalism that was running out of steam, turning sour (Zola's *L'Œuvre* dates from 1886), and that continued, as if impoverished by the repetition, to harp on the same arguments, which came down, little by little, to this one basic plea: "to sound authentic" in expressing "the habits, the customs, and the settings" of the time. Calling upon painters, Duranty, one of the founders of the realist school, prophesied:

> Someday, perhaps, the living woman with her turned-up nose will evict that Greek Venus of marble with her straight nose and heavy chin. She

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[15] *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. Lucy Norton (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.), p. 347.

[16] *The Letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, trans. Ruth Pielkovo (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1922), pp. 72, 94.

[17] " . . . we will strive so that, for us, all objects are disposed in such a way that in a work there is nothing of which we do not know in what place it must be located in an excellent way." Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 82.

[18] Victor Segalen, preface to the *Lettres de Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid* (Paris: Georges Crès & Cie). I cite here the 1930 edition.

> has embedded herself in your brain like debris from an ancient frieze that the mason has built into a wall, once the excavation is over.

And he set out as a program for artists:

> . . . a vast series about society people, priests, peasants, soldiers, workers, and merchants. In such a series characters would differ in their individual roles, yet be linked by those scenes common to all [. . .] marriages, baptisms, births, successions, celebrations, and family scenes.[19]

But if realism and naturalism had once thought they saw in the promotion of contemporary *themes* a radical way of throwing off the yoke of a sickly academicism, Aurier's ideist critique, by way of a symmetrical error, was to bear upon the *themes* of naturalism. And what he demanded above all from his painter friends, in order to counter Jules Bastien-Lepage and Édouard Detaille, was a new iconographical program that would be "idealist, mystical even" (1891 [p. 368]). Recommending the simplification of the figured object (synthetism) and a more expansive decorative aspect to painting (muralism), he demanded no less than that every figural inscription be subordinated to a conceptual and linguistic premise: "The objects, in the painting, have no value as objects [. . .] they are only signs, words, having in themselves no other importance." It was a question of "writing clearly the ideic signification of the object" (1891 [p. 371]). There is no pictorial fact that is not nameable. For the ideist, as for the realist, nothing counts in the painting outside of what is ascribable to a nomenclature ("that object there in reality" for the realist, and the Idea of that object for the ideist). In this way, Aurier (whose critical vocabulary always, symptomatically, took the practice of writing as its reference, e.g., "word," "write," "translation," etc.)[20] failed to perceive one of the revolutionary aspects of the art of his time, an element that was present in the production of the symbolists as well as in that of the impressionists, which was the progressive deconstruction of the iconic sign, the laying bare of what, in the work, exceeds any designation or description of the object. Thus with impressionism, or again in the work of Vuillard and Bonnard, we see the diluting of the object, not into light (the naturalist interpretation), but into the texture, the mark, the brushstroke. Thus also in Gauguin, Bernard, and Denis, we see the arrival of non-mimetic expanses of color that nonetheless, quite clearly, produce pictorial effects.

[19] Louis Émile Edmond Duranty, "The New Painting," in *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886*, ed. Charles S. Moffett (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986), pp. 40, 45.

[20] We should understand as purely rhetorical the question Aurier asks later in the 1891 article: "How, in effect, to suggest in words the whole inexpressible, the whole ocean of Ideas that the clairvoyant eye can see in these magisterial canvases [of Gauguin]" [p. 373]. It is the accumulation, the inextricable condensation, of the Ideas that makes them inexpressible for Aurier, rather than any outflanking of meaning by the pictorial substance.

This is the essential failing of an approach subject-bound to the imperialism of the concept. Exclusively attentive to the Idea, to the thing that incarnates it, the thing that names it, Aurier, in his desire to extricate art from naturalism, thrice locks it in the prison house of language. Reduced to an activity of identifying, vision is brought in line with the restrictive notion of it that Hegel proposed in his *Aesthetics.* As is well known, Hegel dismisses, in the perception of a work of art, the sense of "touch," and accordingly all tactile values, guilty in his eyes of destroying the spiritual integrity of the object:

> For by the sense of touch the individual subject, as a sensuous individual, is simply related to what is sensuously individual and its weight, hardness, softness, and material resistance. The work of art, however, is not purely sensuous but the spirit appearing in the sensuous.[21]

The object "should be contemplated in its independent objectivity," and it is vision, the "theoretical" sense, that allows for this relation:

> Sight, on the other hand, has a purely theoretical relation to objects by means of light, this as it were non-material matter. This for its part lets objects persist freely and independently; it makes them shine and appear but, unlike air and fire, it does not consume them in practice whether unnoticeably or openly. To vision, void of desire, everything is presented which exists materially in space as something outside everything else, but which, because it remains undisturbed in its integrity, is manifest only in its shape and color.[22]

Void of desire . . . The very logic of idealism, aiming at the "spirit" through the unitary appearance of the object (the object in the painting, or painting as object), demands the promotion of a sense that is "cold," resistant to both material seductions and the rush of empathy. For the risk, at each moment, is that of seeing the subject taken up in a sensualistic dispersion, fixated by the seductions of color and texture, and scattered in a fragmentary grasping of the work. This threat—and I shall come back to this—targets *both* the expression of the Idea (the "substratum"), which will emerge in its purity only at the expense of the annihilation of substance, *and* the unity of the viewing subject, who loses centrality and mastery in the movement of the sensory experience. Aurier's idealism was at the furthest remove from the notion put forward by a contemporary of symbolism, Alois Riegl, who made a distinction between two states of vision: the *optic* and the *haptic* (from the Greek *hapto,* meaning to touch). Riegl's haptic is not exactly the tactile sense; it is rather what in vision refers to an experience that is connected with the materiality of the work, i.e., connected with the latter's grain and resistance.[23] Aurier's ideist theory, in contrast, was entirely aimed at the repression of the potential expressivity of the material constituents of the painting: color, texture, surface, limit. As we shall see, the theory went against the evidence of a pictorial practice that was increasingly committed to the investigation of these very same material components.

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[21] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art,* vol. II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 621.

[22] Ibid., p. 622.

This sort of misunderstanding involving a rift between theory and practice is nothing new. Idealist discourse, from Winckelmann to Mondrian, was a red herring, a diversion from and a covering over of a working practice that was always able to find within itself the elements of its own formal advance. When neoclassicism, in the eighteenth century, demanded of its contemporaries that they reproduce the severity, the regularity, "the noble simplicity and serene grandeur" of Greek art, and when it proscribed in the name of the Ideal any naturalistic indulgence, it actually obtained, through and beyond the program it inspired, effects such as: restrained depth, refinement of line, assertion of surface, control of smoothness and whiteness—so many commitments that indicated that painters, sculptors, and engravers were taking full charge of the tangible and prosaic character of their material. The same reversal of practice against theory is present in Hegel when, in a very perceptive section, he points out a painter's most challenging "motif," the human cheek:

> . . . the most difficult thing in the matter of color, the ideal or, as it were, the summit of coloring, is "carnation," the color tone of human flesh, which unites all other colors marvelously in itself without giving independent emphasis to either one or another. The youthful and healthy red of the cheeks is pure carmine without any dash of blue, violet, or yellow; but this red is itself only a gloss, or rather a shimmer, which seems to press outwards from within and then shades off unnoticeably into the rest of the flesh-color, although this latter is an ideal interpenetration [*Ineinander*] of all the fundamental colors. Through the transparent yellow of the skin there shines the red of the arteries and the blue of the veins . . . [24]

Is it not obvious that, in this analytical approach to the color of a cheek, Hegel's attention is focused precisely by the example of painting in its materiality: glazes, color chords, pigmentary opacities. Hegel is only able to so well enumerate the combinations that produce the translucence of a human cheek because he takes painting (whether or not it is of a cheek) as his propaedeutic. With language such as "transparently deep" [*durchsichtig tief*] "interpenetration of different colors," "the result of different surfaces and planes," "transitions," it is clearly artistic practice that homes Hegel's gaze onto the natural world (as well as his vocabulary)—the revenge of the sensory and the "haptic" over the "view void of desire."

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[23] Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* [1902], trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Bretschneider Editore, 1985). See also Henri Maldiney's comment in *Regard Parole Espace* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1973), p. 194 sq., "In the haptic space, vision is attached to the motif in the way of touch; it constitutes the latter's visual analogue."

[24] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, pp. 846–47, translation slightily modified. [Editor's note: The French translation used by Clay is by the eminent philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélevitch, and with regard to the sentences or single words that he quotes and upon which he bases his comment, this translation seems to be closer to the original German text than Knox's English rendering, which is why, with the help of Daniel Heller-Roazen, Knox's text has been modified on two occasions. His translation for *Ineinander* was "inter-association," while in the following paragraph that of the highly unusual ***durchsichtig tief***, crucial for Clay's argument, was "transparent, profound."

No less striking is the repeated effect of painting, as material practice, upon a contemporary of symbolism like Huysmans. Describing *The Crucifixion* (Isenheim altarpiece) by Grünewald ("the most fanatical of naturalists" but also, after more consideration, "the most fanatical of idealists"), the author of *Là-bas* (chap. 1, 1891) risks a singularly audacious metaphor:

> Never before had a painter so charnally envisaged divinity nor so brutally dipped his brush into the wounds, running sores, and the blood-filled and oozing godets of the holes [. . .] In this canvas was revealed the masterpiece of an art obeying the unopposable urge to render the tangible and the invisible, to make manifest the crying impurity of the flesh and to make sublime the infinite distress of the soul.[25]

As if by an effect of precipitation, the word *godet* (the Littré dictionary defines it as a "small pot in which painters put their colors") condenses down into a single substance Christ's putrefied flesh and the preparation of pigments. The substance of the "subject" is at once the substance of the painting itself. Taken to its literal meaning, the metaphor means that Christ's body is already paint (His wounds are godets), and, reciprocally, that the painting contains something like the eucharistic presence of the Savior.

The irruption here of this metaphorical violence is nothing but the exaggerated form of a textural *aspiration.* As Max Milner points out, what Huysmans is trying to do is to fill a fundamental lack in literature's appropriation of the real: "Grünewald's *Crucifixion* represents [for Huysmans] both what is lacking in modern literature and preventing it from becoming truly art, and an exemplary image of the way in which art must force that lack out of its hiding by a realism as intransigent and violent as possible."[26] This is a very valuable remark, on the condition that we add to it the point that what captivates the writer in the painting is perhaps less "realism" than it is the material reality of the pictorial manufacture, in a movement that aims to surpass at once naturalism (the tangible) and idealism (the invisible) so as to better attain a specific experience of matter (something, in fact, like a tacit agreement between pigment and ptomaine). This is a quest for a textural supplement, a charnel or telluric thickness that would be transferred *into writing,* as if painting—grasped in its "haptic" proximity—could *give body* to language. We might consider, for example, how one effect of Grünewald's painting on Huysmans was the long hagiographical account that he gave, in 1901, of Saint Lidwina of Schiedam's martyrdom. Huysmans describes, in detail after detail, like so many close-ups on a painting, the shredded flesh, slowly and endlessly oozing and putrefying, with parts that are lustrous and others matte—a flesh punctured, encrusted, swollen. Where Huysmans claimed to be showing us an edifying case of mystical substitution (an innocent woman expiates through inconceivable suffering the sins of humanity), we can identify another case of substitution: that of the pictorial substance filling in the work of literature. We might also, but in another register, see this return of the material agency in Mallarmé (whose fame began to spread, thanks to Verlaine and Huysmans, after 1884). As Maurice Blanchot says of Mallarmé:

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[25] J. K. Huysmans, *Lower Depths,* trans. Robert Irwin (London: Daedalus, 1986), pp. 14–15. Translation slightly modified.

[26] Max Milner, "Là-bas: l'écriture du roman," *Revue des sciences humaines,* special issue on Huysmans, Lille-III, 1978, pp. 2–3.

> Now he gives language—whose unreal force of absence he had pondered—all the existence and all the material reality that this very language had been commanded to dispel. The "tacit flight of abstraction" is transformed into a visible landscape of words. I no longer say "a flower"; I draw it with syllables.[27]

This is the restitution in sound of the "absent," but it is also the assumption of the physical space of the book as the "total expansion of the letter,"[28] as the "blanks" take on importance and "the paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws."[29] Writing can only authentically take place on condition that one is able to " . . . imagine a certain motif in a certain place, page and height . . . "[30] Recounting his first encounter with *Un Coup de dés*, Valéry wrote: "It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal forms."[31]

Whatever their mystical intentions and philosophical musings (whether moralizing or ideistic), the synthetists, cloisonnists, and the Nabis all stood on this very same material ground. One could draw up an endless catalogue of their investigations into how to give to the surface—what the Renaissance sought to make "transparent" like a window—a concrete and "palpable" quality. Investigations into reflection, brilliance, or, in contrast, mattness, coarseness, and chalkiness, etc. As Fénéon wrote, referring to Paul Serusier, " . . . like Gauguin, [Serusier] works on canvases impregnated with Meudon white. On a support that is so absorbent, and yet furthermore of dubious solidity, his painting is absolutely matte, like so many thickets thrown up by the flat brushstrokes." And, referring to Paul Ranson, Fénéon again spoke of "pastel that must have been dipped in a preparation of glue."[32] Gauguin himself, writing about his painting *Nevermore* in one of his letters to Monfreid, explained:

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[27] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come* [1959], trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 240.

[28] Stéphane Mallarmé, "About the Book" [1895], in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2007), p. 228.

[29] Stéphane Mallarmé, preface to *Un Coup de dés* [1897], trans. Henry Weinfield in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 121.

[30] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 228.

[31] Paul Valéry, "Concerning A Throw of the Dice," in *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 8, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 309.

> I simply wished to suggest with the simple nude, a certain barbaric luxury of ancient times. Voluntarily it is bathed in sad and somber colors. Neither silk nor velvet nor cambric nor gold forms this luxury, but only the medium, made rich by the touch of the artist (February 14, 1897).[33]

And a little later he wrote,

> I am going to give you a bit of technical advice, do with it as you like. Mix a lot of fine sand with your earth pigment. It will make many useful difficulties for you and will keep you from seeing the surface[34] and from falling into the saccharine atrocities of the Beaux Arts school.[35]

We can see also how in the early works of Charles Filiger the expressive use of the reserve is emphasized, along with that of scraping, as a means to favor the co-presence of image and support. And then came the moment, as Marie-Amélie describes it, when Filiger "introduced gold into his works; in *Christ with Angels*, the faces are set within a fine gilded line. Later, in *Head of a Saint*, he spreads the gold discreetly within the face, trailed throughout the profile so as to underscore the mystical nature of the scene." Furthermore, the gold is "applied in wide striations over the entire body of the child, and projected in stars on the midnight blue background [. . .]."[36]

Yet Gauguin went much further, assigning to painting's material specific properties a "differential" nature that it was the artist's vocation to bring to light. In his "Notes on Art at the Universal Exhibition" (the one of 1889 that included the Eiffel Tower), he wrote:

> Of course this exhibition is the triumph of iron, not only with regard to machines but also with regard to architecture. And yet architecture is at its beginnings, in that, as an art, it lacks a style of decoration consistent with the material. [. . .] Better to have monsters of bolted iron. Also,

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[32] Félix Fénéon, "Quelques peintres idéistes," *Le Chat noir*, September 19, 1891. Reprinted in *Œuvres plus que complètes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, vol. 1), pp. 200–202.

[33] *The Letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, p. 77.

[34] As suggested by the context, Gauguin is referring here to the surface of the figured objects and not to the surface medium of the painting.

[35] *The Letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, p. 89. Translation slightly modified.

[36] *Filiger*, p. 10.

> why repaint iron so it looks like butter, why this gilding as if in the Opera [house]? No, that is not good taste. Iron, iron, and more iron![37]

And later in the same text:

> In ceramics, both the shaping and the drawing must be adapted "harmoniously to the material used." I will ask sculptors to give careful thought to this question of adaptation. Plaster, wood, marble, bronze, and fired clay must not all be modeled the same way, since each of these substances has a different type of solidity, of hardness, of aspect.[38]

We can take the measure, then, of how Gauguin, in attributing a specific expressivity to "each substance," is distancing himself from Aurier's projective concepts. It is not the immutable Idea that comes to be imprinted in the inertia of the substance; rather, quite the contrary, it is the substance that elicits and channels the intervention that establishes it as a work of art. Thus we see the beginnings of a decisive inversion of emphasis: the more the proximity and immediacy of the work is asserted, the more the latter's *a priori* reference, the external world, finds itself attenuated. And reciprocally, in response to the effacing of the (external) referent we see the (internal) organic manifestness of the work. Here again, it was the German Romantics who had opened the way by positing, along with Moritz, that a work of art "signifies itself." Self-sufficient, intransitive, it finds its own end within itself.[39] A century later, something close to this very same idea was to find its aphoristic (and therefore compulsive) form in Denis's famous phrase: "Remember that a painting—before it is a battle horse, a female nude, or some sort of anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order" (1890, reprinted in *Theories*, p. 1). The "before it is," we should note in passing, is also to be taken chronologically. In Denis's genealogy, the self-sufficiency of the pictorial constituents is always primary and original: "In the beginning, [there is] the pure arabesque, with as little trompe-l'oeil about it as possible; a wall is empty: fill it with symmetrical marks, harmonious in color (stained glass, Egyptian paintings, Byzantine mosaics, kakemonos)" (ibid., p. 7).

Essentially, Denis's lapidary formula condenses the intuitions of French Romanticism, and principally those of Delacroix (whose *Journal*, incidentally, was not to appear in print until 1893), but also Baudelaire, who had written: "Line and color, both of them have the power to set one thinking and dreaming; the pleasures which spring from them are of different natures, but of a perfect equality and absolutely independent of the subject of the picture."[40] From the outset, and in print after 1895, Denis moved away from "ideism," conscious as he was of Aurier's conceptual and figurative presuppositions (once they were subject to the supremacy of the Idea) and of the reversal of direction that was working itself through in the painting of his own time. In 1896, he was to write that his friends were "too much taken with painting to give themselves over to idealist reveries." And as for symbolism, he said, "certainly not, it was not an idealist theory [. . .], [it was] the immediate result of the positivist philosophies, [. . .] the most strictly scientific endeavor in art."[41] The generation that recognized itself in Gauguin was able to state clearly that the main issue in painting had shifted ground. Painting's basic concern was no longer the relation between painting and the world (how to depict), but the relation between the painting and the viewing subject. The referent (nature for the naturalists, and its ideal correlative for the idealists) was expelled from theoretical discourse just as it was soon (in the twentieth century) to be banished from painting. A painting stood no longer as a sign for something else—it was its own indivisible mass.[42]

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[37] Paul Gauguin, "Notes on Art at the Universal Exhibition," in *Paul Gauguin: The Writings of a Savage*, trans. Eleanor Levieux (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), p. 28. Françoise Cachin notes that Gauguin's views here conceivably echo those of Viollet-le-Duc. She likens the artist's exhortation "Iron, iron, more iron!" to Viollet-le-Duc's functionalism in his *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, e.g., "Stone should look like stone, iron like iron and wood like wood." Françoise Cachin, *Gauguin* [1988], trans. Bambi Ballard (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), p. 92.

[38] Gauguin, "Notes on Art at the Universal Exhibition," p. 31.

[39] Todorov, p. 160. The author cites, as an example, this statement from Moritz: "Seeing a beautiful object, I must feel pleasure uniquely for its own sake; to this end the absence of external finality has to be compensated for by an internal finality; the object must be something fully realized in itself" (p. 157).

40. Charles Baudelaire, "Peintures murales d'Eugène Delacroix à Saint-Sulpice," *La Revue fantaisiste*, September 15, 1861, in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1955), p. 315. See also Hegel's definition in his *Aesthetics* (vol. III, part I): " . . . in painting, the highest degree of liveliness can be expressed only in color. Yet this magic of pure appearance may ultimately be asserted so preponderantly that the subject of the painting becomes in comparison a matter of indifference. In this way, just precisely as sculpture in the further development of reliefs begins to approach painting, so painting in the pure sfumato and magic of its tones of color and their contrast, and the fusion and play of their harmony, begins to swing over to music" (p. 853). Hegel, if only to worry himself with it, remarks here on the relative erasure of the figured object, and on the "liveliness" of color as it draws its power from its autonomous combinations. Delacroix, Baudelaire, Gauguin, and Kandinsky will all take up (positively) the comparison with music (which joins to the advantage of abstracting painting from any external referent the inconvenience of expelling from it the textural component). In his *Charmes et leçons de l'Italie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1933), p. 177, Maurice Denis writes: "I was unaware at the time of Taine's definition, so very close to my own, 'A painting is a colored surface on which the various tones and the various degrees of light are distributed with a certain choice; this is its intimate being; the fact that these tones and these degrees of light make up figures, draperies, or architectures is with them an ulterior property...' " And we know that Taine was a particularly attentive reader of Hegel.

41. Maurice Denis, "Notes sur la peinture religieuse" (1896), in *Théories*, p. 33.

42. Louis Dimier, in his *Histoire de la peinture française au XIXe siècle*, had well understood symbolism's breakthrough towards the pictorial object, its going beyond both naturalism and idealism to come up against the frontality of the painting. Writing about Gauguin, he noted, "They used to say that he was in reaction against impressionism, but we have to see this as less about the system [of impressionism] than about the naturalism that, in the press and in public opinion generally, was associated with it. Gauguin wanted painters to renounce the principle of depicting what they saw. The remarkable thing was that he did not set in opposition to that, as had been done since Winckelmann, the duty to depict the ideal. For the first time in a hundred years, discussion of first principles moved away from the absurd alternative (unknown for centuries beforehand) of the real and the ideal that David's reform had established. Finally, an artist came to realize that painting was neither about reproducing nature nor about giving form to dreams, but it was simply this: to make above all a colored canvas." (Cited by Denis in *Nouvelles théories sur l'art moderne et l'art sacré*, p. 24 [article dated 1916].)

But what was one to put in place of *mimesis*? The answer was the theory of "correspondences." Symbolist painting—as if terrified of its nudity and anxious to justify the *tabula rasa* it was establishing—borrowed the term from literature (Hoffmann, Éliphas Lévi, Baudelaire) and the content from Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, as well as from Delacroix. For Baudelaire, "correspondence" designates two notions (which are, moreover, complementary): a pantheistic, effusive, and co-empathetic relation with nature; and relations of synesthesia ("smells, colors, and sounds answer one another"). For Goethe and Delacroix, each color carries within itself emotive properties that do not depend in any way upon the support of an object. Gauguin and the Nabis condense these various meanings. The former spoke of "mysterious affinities that exist between our brains and certain arrangements of colors and lines" (1895). Denis sought to establish "these mysterious correspondences between beautiful forms and beautiful feelings."[43] And as early as 1890, he had written: "From the canvas itself, flat surface coated in colors, there surges up emotion, consoling or bitter, 'literary,' as the painters say, without the need for interposing the memory of another, older sensation (like that of the motif taken from nature)" (p. 10).

In truth, this was a rather curt, vague, and repetitive formulation, with no foundation other than an uncontrollable emotiveness, threatened equally by the silences of the unsayable and the transports of subjectivism. It was quite capable, as Denis was to see later, of promoting any sort of formless sketch (but, one can also say, it was an idea that was too ambitious, requiring of every viewer to have the ability to produce in language, through poetic transposition, equivalents to the painting). However often Denis was to repeat the argument for it (and whatever, on the other hand, his new options), one feels that in his writings of the 1910s, there was a retrospective lack of satisfaction with the notion of "correspondence," and even, here and there, an intuitive sense of what, in Russia, was in the process of becoming the formalist theory of art.[44] Hence, in 1917, he was to write: "The theory of the flat surface unquestionably closed *the open window onto nature*, renewing the idea of the picture as an art object, having its own laws and intrinsic necessities." And in 1918: "It is the *means* of expression (lines, forms, volumes, colors) and not the represented object that must itself be expressive."[45] It is very much as if Denis

[43] Maurice Denis, "Notes sur la peinture religieuse" (1896), p. 34.

[44] We note that the ideas of the French symbolists were known in Russia before 1914. The Nabis had exhibited there in 1908, and Denis had decorated the dining room of the famous collector Morozov. Notably, in 1909 a Russian translation of "De Gauguin et de Van Gogh au classicisme," which had just appeared in French, was published in Moscow (Cf. Valentine Marcadé, *Le Renouveau de l'art pictural russe* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1971). According to Camilla Gray, "Denis had a great following in Russia, which he visited several times during this period, for his work, more than that of any other French painter, was sympathetic to the Petersburg Symbolist school of literature [. . .] work and articles by him were frequently reproduced in their magazines." Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922* [1962] (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970), p. 70.

[45] In 1933, in his *Charmes et leçons d'Italie*, Denis, citing once again his canonical formulation of 1890, makes the following comparison: "Around the same time, Debussy, speaking about the 'divine arabesque' of musical primitives, said, 'In the music of Bach, it is not the character of the melody that

had foreseen the new theories that were gestating, as if he had surveyed the terrain of the new factors at play ("the picture's intrinsic necessities," etc.), and yet had not managed to rid himself of the symbolist idea of painting as something that provoked particular "states of feeling."

Formalism, whose first stirrings are to be seen in futurism and cubism, was built upon a radical challenge to symbolist pathos, at the same time as it provided instruments of analysis for the arts in general that were much more varied and effective.[46] The primary aim of painting, for Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, was neither the representation of the external world nor the expression of private feeling. Yet the subject was not simply painterly technique (the number of layers, the kind of paintbrushes, etc.). It did not come down to a mimetic and positivistic affirmation of the material data of a painting (for example, the doubling of the flat surface by the regular application of a monochrome layer). For the formalists, it was not a case of showing pictures, but of showing *how* the pictures are made. The painting had no "message" other than its own makeup. A cubist canvas "said" only one thing: the procedure that made it possible. Art had to "expose," to "uncover," its procedures of construction. Lawrence Gowing, in his study of Cézanne, reasoned as a formalist when he wrote about the painter's early works: "He instinctively understood that in the new age the handling *was* the picture."[47]

It remains to say that for Russian formalism, the procedure's uncovering of itself can only happen within a dynamic development (Yury Tynyanov defined the unity of the work as "a dynamic integrity with its own movement"). Substance is not present to itself—its effect only comes from the deviations, displacements, and reworkings that shape it. The transmutation of the *material* constituents (color, texture, flat tint, edge) into *pictorial* operators, the unscrambling in the aesthetic field of the technical and empirical data, can only happen by the integration of the latter at a higher level of the structure. The work of art is nothing other than the modalities of this undertaking.

If I bring up the formalist method here, it is first of all because it allows me to avoid the scholarly opposition between symbolism and naturalism. As we have seen, the latter opposition, by limiting itself to the iconographic register, rather cheaply elides the analysis of artworks in terms of their material investment (there

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moves us, it is its curve: more often even it is the parallel movement of several melodic lines whose coming together, whether by chance or intention, solicits our attention [. . .] But we should not think that there is here anything artificial or unnatural. It is, on the contrary, infinitely more true than the poor little cries of people as they try to wail their way through lyric drama.'" Yet, Denis adds with a sort of nostalgia, "the religious public is not content with pure painting, and we must take account of their aspirations [. . .]. We do not have the right to pay no attention to the Lisieux pilgrim" (p. 177).

46. Roman Jakobson underlined the philosophical influence of German Romanticism—and notably of Novalis—on Russian formalism. As Todorov points out, it was Novalis who stressed the idea of intransitivity. "It was indeed Novalis and not Jakobson who defined poetry as an 'expression for expression's sake.'" Todorov, p. 273.

47. Lawrence Gowing, "The Logic of Organized Sensations," in *Cézanne: The Late Work* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 56.

is no figure that is not always already taken up within the texture that constitutes it). But at the same time a formalist approach provides us with the means to account for the status of figuration at that historical moment where we see the illusionist program at once triumphant (Gérome, Meissonier) and experiencing its own deconstruction.

The concept of *figure* is not tied to the well-worn antagonism between realism and abstraction. Whether iconic or not (like geometrical figures), it forms part of a higher stage of the work. Some will see, for example, a figurative poverty in the way in which Gauguin transports the same motif (woman in the waves, couple facing each other) across all sorts of techniques: engraving, painting, pottery, bas-relief. The formalist, however, will see here the ordered declension of a graphic schema, constant throughout a variety of materials that, by turns, *produce* it. The artwork would thus be less the graphic schema itself than its own declension. The same goes for Gauguin's iconographic "borrowings" from the civilizations of the East and Far East (postcards, photos of Borobudur, etc.). A formal analysis would not in any way see in it an unspeakable predatory move at the expense of universal heritage but rather the invention of a proto-collage the methodology of which Gauguin was moreover to make quite blatantly explicit when he painted *Still Life with Horse's Head* (ca. 1886), a work that shows a combination of heterogeneous objects placed side by side. We can also cite other "collage" forms, such as the wood reliefs of 1890 (*Be in Love*, etc.)—a coalescence, therefore, of antagonistic spaces with disparate scales and transgressed compartments.

The formalist method considers with equanimity all of the factors: textural, chromatic, figurative, etc., and designates as artwork the variety of their arrangements. The history of art is nothing but the way in which any given factor (or group of factors) becomes—according to relations of co-existence, fusion, subordination, etc.—dominant, before ceding its place to others (only to arise again later into prominence, in a new combination).

Let us observe, for example, how the various factors that make up the work circulate within the art of Puvis de Chavannes, one of the founding fathers of symbolism. A specialist in mural painting, Puvis takes account of the presence of the architecture in his treatment of surfaces. The frontality and breadth of the wall are reflected in the figural arrangement: contraction of perspective, simplification of the characters, majestic composition, vast areas of flat color, etc. "If he composes in light tones, he tells us, it is because the decoration must harmonize with the stone, and where he is working, the dominant shade is light."[48] We are here in the presence of a first combination of factors: the wall conditions the economy of the figured scene, and even its chromatic scheme.

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[48] Aimée Brown-Price in the catalogue *Puvis de Chavannes*, published on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition of 1976–77 at the Grand Palais in Paris. I am following, step by step, this author's thoroughly well-documented study.

A second combination is as follows: Puvis did not paint alfresco but rather on large canvases that were then affixed to the wall. According to his follower Paul Baudouin,

> . . . for his large compositions, and even for his paintings and studies, he used only canvas primed with plaster and glue, so as to have the matte look that, along with his fine painterly skill, gave to his decorations the appearance almost of frescoes.[49]

Puvis *feigned* alfresco painting. He *copied* the grain of the wall, the mortar (slaked lime, sand), bringing them, in some way, to the *forefront* of the canvas. There is an illusionistic practice, a trompe-l'œil, that comes to be combined with a frontal, decorative, and *abstracticizing* aesthetics. This is a typical case of "formal" displacement: the unity of the work as a "dynamic integrity" has forced the denaturing, and the erasure, of a medium traditionally devoted to the brilliances and ambiguities of substance.

There remains one further arrangement: Puvis's frontal and monumental aesthetic is transferred unchanged to his easel paintings. A correlation is then made to occur between mural painting and a movable support. By a series of successive mutations, the characteristics of the fresco, the first model, are displaced onto a new ground. The combinatory relation of physical wall and flat style of painting is abandoned, but the manner persists. The absent wall continues to work the painting. The result is a completely new "form," one that was, moreover, rather badly received by his contemporaries but that was to have its now-recognized influence on Seurat and Gauguin. "His handling of the pigmentary paste is looking to render neither values nor volumes; rather, on the contrary, it increasingly masks them."[50] This was a *textural* uniformity that was soon to make its appearance in Seurat as a *gestural* unity: it is the regular application of the "small dots" that gives to *La Grande Jatte* the material evenness of the work. This is a surface effect that Denis brings to the fore in one of his own paintings from 1891. And a note from Fénéon referring to such works: "As a means of execution, a *pointillis* (a brocade of dots) that he stitches onto a flat surface, in order to give the painting a sort of epidermic life."[51] We find the same "pointillis" yet again in Vuillard (*The Stevedores*, 1890)—but this time by means of regular dabs devoid of any denotation, decorative strokes that anticipate the cubist use of the "petit point" and even of the "papier collé" (pasted paper).

Elsewhere, it was to be the technical procedures, the accidents, and the resistances of the material that, far from being erased, were to become the dominant features of the completed work. Leo Steinberg has shown how Rodin (*La Terre*,

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[49] Paul Baudouin, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, May 1935. Cited in *Le Petit Journal des grandes expositions* 41 (1976), p. 1.

[50] Aimée Brown-Price, p. 14.

[51] Fénéon, "Quelques peintres idéistes," p. 200.

1884; *Figure volante, L'Homme qui marche,* etc.) deliberately allowed the textural imperfections of the clay to remain: cracks, marks left by wet rags, little pellets, and knife gashes to be cast in the final bronze.[52] The principal agency here is no longer the academic referent, in its integrity, but the very life of the material and the manual investment that it demands. The contingencies of execution, automatic actions, and chance events are raised to the register of expression. Note also how Gauguin, in his reliefs, lets appear the grain of the wood and the chisel grooves so as to produce what Christopher Gray has called a certain "woodenness" that is inseparable from the figures. The surface is not completely covered by the paint, in a way that would hide the tactile components, but rather "stained," impregnated with color.

In the same way, in Munch and sometimes in Lautrec, the brush only lazily accompanies the flow of diluted pigment. Like rain on a windowpane, rivulets take form, transgressing the contour of the figures, giving to the latter, held in the interweaving that passes through them, a ghostlike appearance. And finally, we have Vuillard, who does not paint women under the lamp so much as the becoming-smudge of slowly eroding characters. They are almost abolished—but in this "almost" lies all the charm—within the scab growth that surrounds them. In 1893, Geffroy said of Vuillard's painting that it "makes one think of the woolly underside of a tapestry." The economy of the surface resides neither in the arrangement of the figural scene nor in any compositional design, but in the edge-to-edge of smudged and vermiculated areas that seem like so many fragments of wallpaper, whose coherence is to be found only in the color order (color contrast, but also, and quite often, the diffuse reign of a dominant color).

We could cite here an infinite number of combinations in which, at various stages of the pictorial structure, heterogenous elements coexist. Good painting is always *aporetic,* and its capacity to appear, to "hold together" in space, and to face us "openly" derives in all cases from the contradictions that it shows. Conflicts, therefore, that hold the canvas in "tension," delivering it to us as a living thing that is always at work. Yet these conflicts are themselves the projected image of a physical tussle: the artist at grips with, and in the grip of, the material he works. I have summarized earlier the conception of image production that was prevalent in the classical world and in the Renaissance, namely, the notion of an inert support onto which is inscribed a design, already formed within the mind of the painter and that the latter has only to execute (and I recalled that, in 1890, Aurier, as apostle of his "ideism," fully accepted this notion). In this regard, both with classicism and "ideism," we are on the side of what A. W. Schlegel, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, identified as *mechanical form* in a famous distinction:

> Form is mechanical when, through external force, it is imparted to any material merely as an accidental addition, without reference to its quality; as, for example, when we give a particular shape (*Gestalt*) to a soft mass so that it may remain the same after its induration.

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[52] Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 393. For more on the same theme, see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), chapter 1.

Over against the mechanical, Schlegel placed the "organic form," born from within the thing (or work), determined by the materiality, the "hidden essence" of the thing (or work).[53]

If we carry this over into the field of painting, this opposition between the "mechanical" and the "organic" can inform us about the difference between the *projective* and the *inductive* types of surface, i.e., between support and *subjectile* (a term much appreciated by Fénéon). Seen through the lens of the "organic," an artwork emerges simultaneously from a *project* of inscription and the *process* of this inscription in contact with the resistance of a substance. How does the particular substance yield itself *relative* to the artist's intention? How does the artistic intention adapt itself as it takes on form? (Picasso: "You have to have an idea of what you are going to do, but it must be a vague idea.") Questions such as these assume a new posture on the part of the artist towards the work. We might call this *proclivity* (a state of leaning over). It is not the same as *astasia* (collapse, inability to stand up). It implies the body's negotiation faced with the challenge of its own falling down. And, in fact, this has been, since Delacroix, the posture of the modern artist, aware that all thought of mastery or control is constantly subverted by experience: the work, in its gestation, returns back upon the subject (the artist) who is attempting to arouse it into existence. This is a subject, therefore, that is destabilized, in a state of *mise en abîme*, a stranger to the Cartesian certainty of a freely choosing will. It is precisely this uncertainty and struggle, this fragility, this subject in perpetual crisis, that Aurier's dogmatism utterly rejects. How can we reconcile with Aurier's system Gauguin's stupefaction, as expressed thus in a letter to Sérusier: "My paintings frighten me so much that I can't talk about what I'm doing here. People will never accept them" (March 23, 1892)?

What Aurier refused to see, Nietzsche, in texts that were exactly contemporary to his, proclaimed loudly. As is well known, a theory of art is woven into the Nietzschean project of the inversion of all values. Art is the site where this inversion is tested and deployed. Against Plato, "the greatest enemy of art which Europe has produced," against "the ascetic ideal," and denouncing philosophers with their "quiet and submissive internal organs,"[54] and the "fits of the vapours that are 'idealism'!"(1888, 14[37]).[55] Nietzsche claims that art is "the great stimulant of life, a rush of life, a will to live" (1888, 15[10]).[56] He accords supreme value to the instinctual, to the profusion of drives: "bubbling and brimming over all limits. [. . .] Art reminds us of states of animal vigor, it's on the one hand a surplus and overflow of flourishing corporeality into the world of images and wishes . . . " (1887, 9[102]).[57] This movement of expansion and distension does not take place without a deflation of consciousness: "In the tremendous multiplicity of what happens within an organism, the part we become conscious of is merely a little corner" (1887, 11[83]).[58] Thus art—Nietzsche returns here to classical themes—is "prefigured" at once by the (Apollonian) *dream* with its upsurging of uncensored images, "a pleasure in seeing forms, in making forms"(1888, 14[18]), and by (Dionysian) *intoxication*: "A reaching out beyond personhood, beyond everyday life, society, reality, as an abyss of forgetting, a passionate and painful overflowing into darker, fuller, less stable conditions" (1888, 14[14]).

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[53] A. W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. J. Black, cited in Todorov, pp. 179–80. Translation slightly modified.

[54] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Genealogy of Morals," in *The Essential Nietzsche*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Chartwell Books, 2017), pp. 316 and 279.

[55] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 244.

[56] Translator's note: For the quotations from Nietzsche's Unpublished Fragments, I have included published translations where possible. In all other cases, I am grateful to Peter Schwartz for help with translating the original German.

[57] Nietzsche, *Writings*, p. 160.

We see here a dual explosive splintering: on the one hand, the image's emergence compromises bodily control, muddying and undoing the body's unity: "An image arising within us already seems like a movement of the limbs—a certain suspension of the will" (1888, 14[170]); on the other hand, the artist, through his adhesion—or, better, his adhering—to the object (the pleasure object), grasps the various components of the work in their autonomy: "the artist gradually begins to love, for their own sake, the means by which the state of intoxication makes itself known: the extreme delicacy and splendor of the color, the clarity of the line, the nuance of the *tone*—that which is distinct, whereas usually, in what is normal all distinction is lacking" (1888, 14[47]). It is the artist's intoxication that makes this splintering possible, and the rupture, in its turn, produces more intoxication: "All distinct things, all nuances, to the extent that they recall to mind the extreme intensifications of force produced by intoxication, retroactively awaken this feeling of intoxication. The effect of artworks is to *arouse the state in which one creates works of art,* to intoxicate . . . " (1888, 14[47]).

For Nietzsche, the mirror image of the gaze's work of diffraction is the split subject. A subject, therefore, that is perforated, floating, unfocused, polycentric, always in excess of its take on the world, and shot through with regional passions. And yet to name the subject is already to say too much, since he writes that there is no "metaphysical subject" but rather "a millionfold growth, with initiatives of its own and half its own" (1887, 11[111]).[59] Not the body as the site where tensions would show themselves, but tensions that make bodies: "our subconscious world of servant organs."[60] And, as he writes in *The Will to Power*, "The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general."[61]

We must put Nietzsche's voice, with all its violence, tempestuousness, and imperiousness, alongside the symbolist moment, because Nietzsche is articulating, loudly and clearly, what was latent, i.e., what idealism was hiding and repressing, and this was the place of the body and the unconscious in human destiny. Nietzsche announces the crisis of the subject—nexus of organs, polymorphically perverse—caught up in the economy of desire (this was the moment in history when Freud, as a student of Charcot, was at the Salpêtrière psychiatric hospital).[62] An entire image of the human self was being shattered, and we can see Aurier's lamentations, the tears he sheds for it, in notes (published posthumously) that are quite symptomatic, in which he calls plainly for precisely the "ascetic ideal" that Nietzsche denounces as a rule of life:

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[58] Nietzsche, *Writings*, p. 214.

[59] Ibid., p. 221.

[60] Nietzsche, "The Genealogy of Morals," p. 233.

[61] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), Book III (485), p. 270.

> The only way to understand a work of art is to become its lover. This is possible, since a work is a being that has a soul, and that shows it in a language that can be learned. It is easier even to feel true LOVE for a work of art than for a woman, since in a work of art the material scarcely exists, and it will never make the love degenerate into sensuality. (1892b [711])

This text is unique in its frankness. An intense work of sublimation operates here a dual movement: the world (women, the senses) is rejected in favor of painting, and then painting, in its turn, is voided of all sensuality:

> The sensualism of this century has unlearned us of how to see in woman anything other than a block of flesh for the satisfaction of our material desires. The love of a woman is no longer permitted us. This century's skepticism has unlearned us of seeing in God anything other than a nominal abstraction that is perhaps non-existent. The love of God is no longer permitted us. Only one love is still allowed, and this is for works of art. Let us throw ourselves upon this raft of salvation. Let us become mystics of art. (Ibid., p. 711)

Mystics—we are obviously very far here from Gauguin's "rutting eye." Had Aurier lived longer, the discord would certainly have broken out.[63] His programmatic insistence was not limited to recommending this or that category of "subject"; it failed completely to see, indeed it censored, what appears to us today to have been the major innovation of the time, namely, the physical investment of the artist, his immediate and *direct* confrontation with the material of the work (Aurier writes, " . . . in the work of art, the material scarcely exists . . . " [ibid., p. 711]).

Let us take but one example: the sixty or so ceramics (although the artist preferred to call them "sculptures")[64] that Gauguin made during the years 1886–87. They figure among the founding works of modern visual art (Aurier noted, "How can one explain, finally, the strange, barbaric, and savage ceramics, in which, sublime potter that he is, he has kneaded more of the soul than the clay?" [1891, p. 374]. Before Gauguin, vases were usually given a rough shape on the pottery wheel, cast in plaster molds, and finally retouched and decorated. Gauguin's shattering innovation was to take hold of the clay itself with his bare hands and to use his fingers to shape the various bits, strips, and coils of wet clay that he then added to one another freely, following the lead of his hands as they explored, felt out, and dreamt. It was all in the touch—the palms of the hands and the pads of the fingers slipping over the viscous substance. What Gauguin wanted above all was "to replace the potter at his wheel with intelligent hands that can communicate to the vase the life of a figure," and "to give to the art of ceramics new momentum for the creation of new forms made with the hands."[65]

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[62] See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (1982), (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[63] The discord was to surface ten years later, exploding like a time bomb. In his letter to Monfreid of November 1901, Gauguin was to write: "You know what I think of all these false ideas of symbolism, both in literature and painting, so it's useless to repeat it." They are, he says, "lucubrations of literary critics." *The Letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, pp. 149–50.

[64] See Merete Bodelsen, *Gauguin's Ceramics in Danish Collections* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960), p. 16.

There is nothing here in the way of a model, design, or composition that precedes the gesture that seems to draw directly upon magical and primitive sources.[66] Dwelling places, strange movements, funereal, gaping openings, "swollen, budding shapes, covered in plant-like protuberances."[67] The hand elicits and at once blindly submits to the uprising of the substance—the local passions of the material. Gauguin described it thus in a letter to Bernard dated June 1890:

> I seek the character in every lump of matter. Now the character of stoneware pottery is the emotion of the furnace, and the figure calcined in this inferno expresses, I think, this character pretty distinctly, just as an artist imagined by Dante in his vision of the Inferno. Poor devil driven in upon himself in order to endure suffering.[68]

The metaphorical acceleration from "furnace" to "inferno" in this statement is decisive. This is the artist as calcinated, identified with his object, and becoming himself the subject of the combustion he sets off in an uncontrollable movement of empathy, the portent of a radical investment—the splitting apart of the subject by the Will. So was Gauguin a Nietzschean? Among the lightning-shocks, invective, and debris of Nietzsche's breathless thoughts, one might indeed believe one was seeing, in counter-relief, something like the painter Gauguin. Were they not, each one of them, desirous of "awakening the *faded ideals* in their merciless severity and brutality, as the most magnificent monsters they are . . . "?[69] But the same Gauguin could also write, in a letter to Monfreid dated August 1901, "The critics say stupid things. [. . .] So many fools who wish to analyze our pleasures—unless they think it's our job to make them cum."[70]

—Translated from the French by Nicholas Huckle

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[65] Gauguin's statements are cited in Jean d'Albis, *Ernest Chaplet* (Paris: Les Presses de la Connaissance, 1976).

[66] Rosalind Krauss makes this observation in *Passages*, p. 34. See also Henri Focillon's pages on Gauguin in his "In Praise of Hands" [1934] in *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. S. L. Faisan, Jr. (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1948), pp. 65–78.

[67] Cachin, p. 49.

[68] Paul Gauguin, *Letters to his Wife and Friends*, ed. Maurice Malingue, trans. Henry J. Stenning (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003), pp. 144–45.

[69] Fragment 10[24] in *Unpublished Fragments (Summer 1886–Fall 1887)*, trans. George H. Leiner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), e-book, np.

[70] *The Letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, p. 143.